

Scotpress

Make It

So

18



a
Star Trek
fanzine

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ScoTpress - Sheila Clark, Valerie Piacentini, Janet Quarton & Shona

Hello, and welcome to Make It So 18.

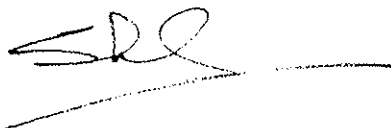
This is the fifth zine we've put out in the new A5 size. Most of you seem to like - or at least have no objection to - the new size; ease of carrying, of storing, and of course a lower price are all positive advantages that most of you mentioned. Of course, it wasn't until the first three had been out for two or three months that a picture of reader reaction began to emerge, and the fourth one was printed while that reaction was still coming in. With this issue we're taking note of certain of your comments.

The biggest objection levelled at the new size of zine was the small print (though it was exactly the same as the print in the newsletter). We've therefore increased the size of print slightly; we hope this helps. The new size would have increased the length from 100 pages to around 112 if we had left it single column; this would have meant either cutting it by 12 pages (to keep it at 100 pages, since we've found that to be the easiest length to work to) or increasing the price. By double columning it we not only saved those extra pages, we were able to slot in four additional pages.

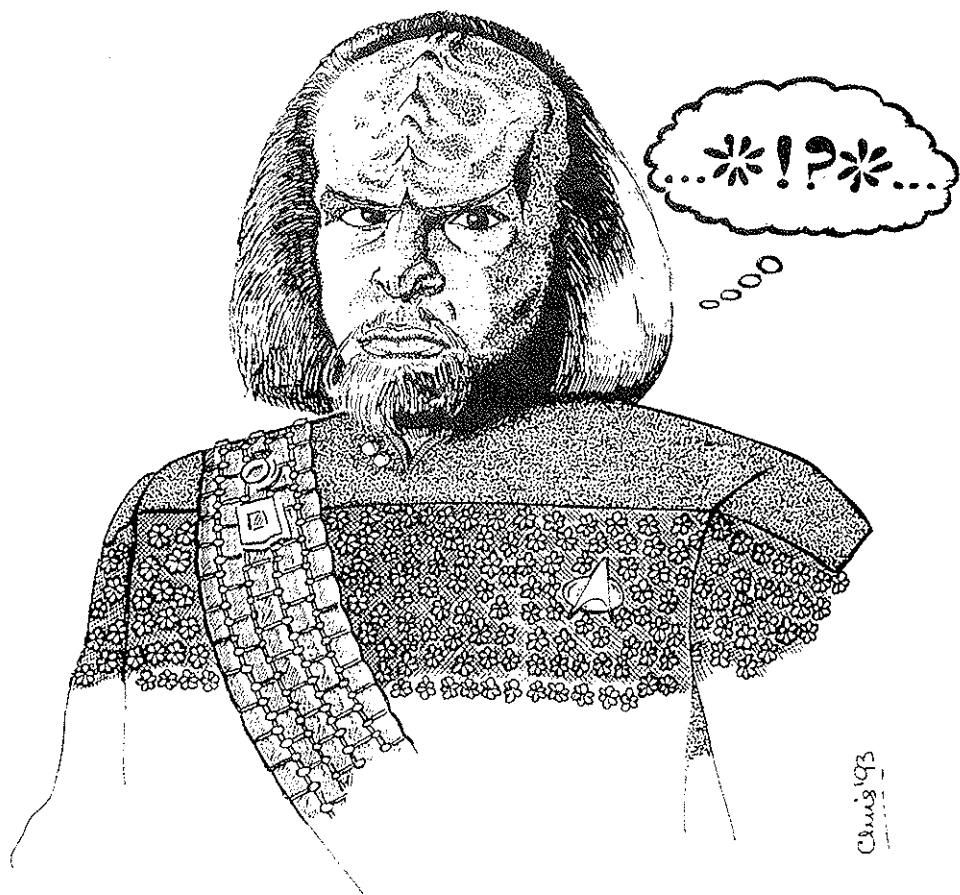
We're still looking for reader reaction - do you think this is easier to read than the single-columned zine in the same size of print as the newsletter? The shorter line is supposed to be easier to read in this size of print, and also lets us include more material. We'd like as much reaction as possible before the beginning of February, since we'll be putting zines to the printer during February and March in readiness for next year's cons and if we get any helpful, constructive comments we would like to act on them for these zines.

Earlier in 1993, everyone putting out zines found sales had dropped alarmingly; our solution, the A5 size which let us cut the price, has resulted in an increase in sales. As long as this continues, we no longer need to think of cutting back on zine production. The next four issues of Make It So are compiled; 19 - 21 are short stories, and 22 is another novel by Debbie Lee (Space Trial). We hope to have an issue of Enterprise - Log Entries out in early spring as well. We're looking for submissions for 23 on, and Classic Trek stories for Enterprise - Log Entries 91 on and IDIC Log 16 on. We're also in the market for DS9 stories; if we get enough of these, we'll put out a DS9 zine.

Classic Trek submissions should be sent to Valerie Piacentini, 20 Ardrossan Rd, Saltcoats, Ayrshire; TNG and DS9 submissions should be sent to Sheila Clark, 6 Craigmill Cottages, Strathmartine, by Dundee.



Laura Ashley's bid for the new
Starfleet uniform contract
is not universally popular.



DREAMING THROUGH THE TWILIGHT

by

Jackie Marshall

The world slept, idling in a dazzled dream of light and colour.

The sky was a bold splash of blue, streaked with smoke-thin strands of white cloud and laced with a glossy fringe of green-leaved trees. The smooth rocks at the far edge of the pool were daubed in a pattern of warm earth shades - umbers and ochres - and the pool itself was an open yawn in the heat of the day as it swallowed him up in iridescent liquid, marbled in shades of aquamarine and turquoise.

Will Riker cleaved his way through the water, sending it sliding past his heated skin in a shimmering spill of crystal droplets, until he reached the edge of the pool and dropped his feet into the cool slickness of mud. The sun was warm on his back as he stood up.

"You forget how much we miss, don't you?" he remarked. "It's good to be reminded." They had the holodecks, but whilst those particular devices could accurately re-create the substance somehow they could never exactly capture the essence. Like replicated food, it just wasn't quite the same.

"Hmph." His companion's response could have meant a great many things but it was impossible to guess accurately at which without seeing the speaker's expression.

Jean-Luc Picard was lying face down on a rocky outcrop, his arms acting

as a pillow for his head. Silken sunlight spilled through the canopy of leaves above him, dappling his skin in patterns of light and shade. Riker narrowed his eyes against the sun and glanced across at the Captain.

What the hell are we doing here? he wondered. This isn't getting us anywhere.

Deanna and Beverly had been implacable. Riker might have faced down one of them, but the two in tandem formed a force he had no defence against.

"Will, you need a vacation," Beverly Crusher said. "You never got a proper break whilst the Enterprise was being re-fitted. Now that there's some fine tuning to do after the shake-down voyage, you have a golden opportunity to remedy that."

"I understand that the realignments and adjustments will take two or three days," Deanna came in, "and that it will be largely Geordi's province. Data can take overall command and consult you as necessary. There's no need for you to be on board."

"All right, I accept that." He raised his hands, as if the words they commanded were tangible weapons he had to fend off. "All right, I'll go on vacation. I'll leave the Enterprise at Starbase 44, I'll transport down to

Markalla V and go back-packing if that's what you want. But the Captain's just *had* a holiday, on Earth. He isn't going to want - "

"We shall both strongly recommend that he also takes advantage of this opportunity for shore leave," Deanna said, and fixed him with those large luminous eyes.

Eyes that look as if they could see straight into your soul, Riker reflected, and sometimes, disconcertingly, do precisely that.

"Will, a trauma of such magnitude is not overcome by one brief holiday, even though I am given to understand that it resolved certain family matters..."

"But in many ways *we* are his family now, whether he acknowledges it or not," Beverly cut in quietly, her expression serious, "and Deanna feels that there are still matters outstanding here." She exchanged quick glances with the Counselor.

Now for the final cut and thrust, Riker thought, bracing himself for the impact of the coming words.

"I sense a certain... unwillingness on your part to fully accept the implications of what happened to the Captain," Deanna stated.

"I know what happened, Deanna, I was there - remember? And now it's over. We put it behind us and we go on. That's what Picard's doing, that's what I'm doing."

"That's what you *think* you're doing." Deanna paced round him, watching him, alert to the slightest nuance of body movement.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Riker's voice was defensive; he knew his

posture matched it.

"I can feel that your relationship is under strain, causing stress for you both. It's entirely natural that in response to what has happened you will regard each other differently in certain respects. What concerns me - concerns us both - is that you're trying to restore stability without any corresponding attempt to resolve the issues raised by recent events."

"What is there to resolve?"

"That's for you to find out," Deanna said. "It might be helpful if you considered what you think about Picard now."

"I think he's been through hell. I think he's coping with it just fine, but - "

"But?" Beverly pounced, catching his unguarded word before he could retrieve it.

"Go on, Will," Deanna said from behind him. "This is important."

Riker took a deep breath. "Very well. I think his self-confidence must have taken a terrible battering. I think that if he doesn't believe in himself any more he could be..." He stopped then, not wanting to complete the condemnation.

"Unfit to command," Beverly finished flatly. "There's no need to look like that, Will. It's a possibility that we have to acknowledge."

"Beverly and I would be failing everyone if we stood by and let the present situation continue," Deanna said. She hesitated fractionally, then added in the same level tone, "We could, of course, submit a report, detailing misgivings about the Captain's ability to command - despite the fact that he is currently fulfilling his duties in that respect. He

might then be asked to stand down in your favour - "

"Is *that* what this is all about? I'm not being party to any underhand scheme to have Picard demoted, do you understand me?" Riker rounded on them both. "After all he's been through... We're supposed to be a *team*! If we can't give Picard the support he needs, if we can't provide that safety net until he's got his confidence back, then I think we're the ones with the problem here, *we're* the ones who should damn well stand down."

"Will," Deanna said gently, flashing a glance at Beverly as if his reaction had just confirmed something she already knew, "there's no scheme here. We agree with you. We must support the Captain through this. He deserves no less."

And Riker's anger faded. *I over-reacted*, he thought bleakly. *Just as you intended. Because you completed an equation I've been trying to avoid facing. I just don't want to admit to myself that anyone so strong, so self-assured as Picard, could be that badly maimed, could even no longer be fit for command. And the thought of discovering otherwise leaves me cold.*

"We need you with us, Will," Beverly said. "We can't do this without you. That's why the two of you have to find some way of working together, of being comfortable with each other again."

He had given way, defences battered down by the force of their words.

He and Picard had transported down to Markalla V the next day.

Riker idly flipped a pebble into the pool and watched as the ripples circled away from the impact. Picard might have

been a statue beside him. Apart from the regular rise and fall of his breathing he never moved, not even when a gaudy butterfly landed on his back, fluttering jewel-bright wings. Riker leaned forward and released his breath against it. The insect zig-zagged away in a bright flash of emerald. Picard rolled over and sat up.

"Sorry," Riker said. "Did I disturb you?"

"Hardly. I wasn't asleep."

Then what were you doing? Riker wondered. He wasn't used to seeing Picard idle and inactive for any length of time. He had one of the most alert, most enquiring minds Riker had known, yet for this trip he'd not brought any of his much-cherished library with him. Nor had he seemed to want to talk. Instead, they'd stepped polite verbal circles round each other for the last two days. On the Enterprise, Riker could have walked away from it, could have pushed to one side the broken behaviour patterns he was observing. Not here. Down on Markalla V there was nothing he could fix on to avoid recognizing the painfully obvious truth.

And just what the hell am I supposed to do about it? Riker wondered. *How can we resolve anything when we can't even talk any more? It always used to be easy enough. The first time we met you gave me permission always to speak frankly to you, but it's different now. I just don't know what to say to you. I'm frightened of saying the wrong thing, of having you react in such a way that totally destroys your credibility in my eyes.*

Picard drew up his knees, wrapped his arms around them and stared out across the pool. He didn't look at Riker.

There's always been that element of reserve to you, but now it's almost as if you've forgotten how to let go of that, Riker mused.

Or is it that life, love and laughter are locked for you in a past that seems... irrelevant?

A chill stroked down Riker's back, reminding him suddenly, uncomfortably, of exactly what Picard had been through. He shrugged it off sharply, replacing it with a flare of irritation - at himself, at Picard, at their joint inability to break down the barrier between them. And at their conversation defying his attempts to make it natural and relaxed, remaining instead stilted and formal.

Meaningless.

He flipped another pebble into the pool and stared down at Picard's splintered reflection.

The sun set in a blaze of scarlet and gold. The rose-stained sky finally faded into dusk, wrapping them in soft purple folds, drenching them with the scent from the night-lilies now opening around them.

They were camped a short distance away from the pool in a gently dipping dell of springy turf. Riker had made a stone cairn and lighted a fire on which to cook their supper - fresh fish, crisp and smoked on the outside, hot and succulent inside.

Picard had remained withdrawn, his comments limited to factual observations or monosyllabic answers to Riker's continued desultory attempts at conversation. The silence they'd now lapsed into should have - and once would have - been companionable, comfortable. But it wasn't. Where before they might have felt no need of words, now they couldn't find the right ones. And the gulf created by their absence continued to widen as the minutes and hours passed.

The dark deepened and the single moon, stamped like a silver crescent in the star-strewn sky, threw the world beneath it into stark relief.

Riker yawned, lifting a hand belatedly to his mouth to stifle it.

"It's getting late," Picard said. "Maybe we should call it a night."

"All right." Riker nodded, rising to his feet and crossing to where their packs lay. He tossed Picard's over to him and he fielded it.

"Shall I damp down the fire?"

"I'll see to it," Riker said. "Shall we see if we can get an early start tomorrow? I've a mind to head for those forests to the south. I feel like a change of scenery. If that's all right by you."

Picard didn't look at him as he unrolled his bedding. "It's fine by me," he said.

Riker opened his eyes, blinking back sleep.

For a few seconds he wasn't sure why he had wakened, nor of exactly where he was. Then his senses adjusted to his surroundings, taking automatic note of the still, cool quality of the air and the faint signs of encroaching dawn in the clear dark sky. Memory flooded back, and so too did his awareness of the sound that had dragged at his consciousness and clawed him from sleep.

Half whimper, half moan, it was like the cry of an animal in pain. Riker's eyes widened in sudden shocked comprehension. The cry of a very *Human* animal. He threw back the sheet that

covered him and rose to his feet.

Picard lay at the other side of the stone cairn, curled on one side, knees drawn up, arms wrapped round his head. Between them, Riker could see that his eyes were closed. *Sleeping?* he wondered.

"Captain?"

There was no response and no change to that thin keening being squeezed from his throat. Riker wondered whether to wake him from the nightmare and then, as Picard's arms shifted, he saw the deep lines of stress, the sheen of sweat, the twisted lips, and wondered no longer. He stretched out a hand to Picard's shoulder and shook him.

"Sir?"

Picard jerked awake suddenly on a sharp cry of acute distress. His eyes were dark, haunted, as they snapped open and they seemed to look right through Riker.

"Sir?" Riker said again.

Slowly Picard's eyes focussed. Then he breathed one single terrible word. "*Borg.*"

"It's all right," Riker said quickly, a little too quickly. "It was just a nightmare, it's over now."

Picard looked at him as if registering him properly for the first time. "It's not over," he said thickly, "it'll never be over. It's with me until the day I die."

There was such pain, such dreadful truth in that statement that Riker's glib words of reassurance died unspoken and he could only crouch silently next to Picard.

I don't want to hear this, he thought, I don't want to know this.

Picard sat up, slowly, and carefully drew the covers up around his shoulders. The exaggerated nature of the movements betrayed his continuing distress. He shivered a little.

"Shall I stoke up the fire?" Riker asked, needing to move, needing to do something - anything - to avoid facing - what? *The truth? A new reality I feel painfully ill-equipped to deal with?* "If you're cold I can -"

"Stop it, Will," Picard ordered, with a snap to his voice that Riker hadn't expected.

"Stop what?"

"Stop being so damned... punctilious about all of this!" Picard had raised his head. His expression was still haggard but there was more than a spark now in the eyes that fixed on Riker.

"I thought that was the way you wanted it," Riker returned quietly.

"Did you really?" The precise, clipped tone of the response was familiar, but the bitterness lacing it was not. "How could you presume to know that when you never took the trouble to ask?"

Under attack, Riker faltered, "I didn't know *how* to ask... I don't know what to say to you anymore."

Picard stared at him and drew in his breath. He released it heavily. "No, no, of course you don't," he said, and his voice was quieter. "I'm sorry. Deanna tells me that anger is understandable, but I need to direct it with more care. I apologise, Commander."

Riker took a deep breath and drew in a lungful of the fresh soil-smell carried in the air, his resolve sharpening as his senses stirred. If they couldn't speak

openly now, the gulf between them would widen beyond any real bridging. He dropped onto his knees at Picard's side. "I'd rather you talked to me," he said simply. "That is why we're here. I take it you're aware of that."

"Oh yes, I'm fully aware of it. So. What shall we talk about?"

"Us. You and me. Where we stand. I think that's the general idea."

"Yes." But for a few moments Picard said nothing, looking out to where the pale sheen of dawn was beginning to curve over the horizon. A few birds were already active, carolling energetically to each other in the twilight air as they fidgeted in the branches of the nearby trees. "That's no easier for me than it is for you."

"Do you want to talk about what happened?" Riker asked hesitantly. "I know the bare facts, but..."

"Then you have a framework for understanding, but you don't *know*..." Unexpectedly Picard's voice caught, faltered. "They stole everything I was, Will, used me to destroy... Every memory they touched, they violated... You don't know... Dear God, I hope you never know!"

Will stretched out a hand and placed it over one of Picard's tightly clenched fists, gripping gently until he saw the frozen look of horror in Picard's eyes began to lift.

When you were released from the Borg, one of the first things you did was to offer me support, approbation, Riker thought in sudden anger at himself. And what have I offered you in return? Nothing. Guinan told me I had to let you go, and I did. Only when it was all over I forgot to bring you back.

Picard took a long breath, steadying his voice. "So now I hide behind what I was and try to discover who I am. Only here - " his free hand spread briefly, indicating their surroundings " - there's nothing to hide behind, and it's hard, Will, it's... very hard." His expression was bleak. "To wake feeling so... outraged. So guilty."

"You've no reason to feel guilty," Riker said. "You were - "

"A victim?" Picard anticipated, his voice still strained. "But victims *do* feel guilt, whether it's reasonable or not. We're so conditioned to believing ourselves to be in control that when that ability is taken from us we feel as if we're to blame, as if we *let* it be done to us."

"You didn't," Riker said forcefully. "You were in the wrong place at the wrong time. That's all."

"Oh yes, I know that." Picard's voice grew stronger, regaining almost all its customary resonance, and there was a steely set to his eyes now that lent edge to his words. "Make no mistake, Will, I have no intention of allowing myself be destroyed by what the Borg did to me. I've accepted that I am not to blame for what they made me do, that I didn't have the ability to stop them. It wasn't my failure; it was a fact of life."

Those words were not intended as a meaningless reassurance for his benefit, Riker realised. Nor did Picard's earlier distress make them a lie. Rather, the statement formed a very personal mantra, one that Picard believed implicitly and would continue to draw strength from. And Riker took heart from it too. He was silent for some time before speaking again and when he did so, it was almost as if to himself. "It was always at the back of my mind, how I would've coped if it were I who - "

"But it wasn't," Picard said. "Just let me cope with it, and you cope with me. That's all that's necessary. You have nothing to prove, Will."

"I have *everything* to prove!" Riker returned with some heat. "Don't you see that? I've always had something to prove. I want to be *worthy*."

"Worthy? Worthy of what?"

"Of Starfleet, of the Enterprise... of you."

"Of *me*?" Picard repeated, as if this was the last confession he expected.

"Always of you," Riker said. "Even if lately..." He paused. "I don't know quite how to put this, sir."

"Out with it, Will." If there was more than a touch of peremptoriness in Picard's voice, Riker considered it justified.

"All right. The truth of it is I didn't want to hear any of what you've just been telling me."

"The truth of it is," Picard countered quietly, choosing his words with careful deliberation, "that I didn't want to share any of it. Not with you. You see, I felt I no longer had your confidence, your trust."

"Trust?" Riker gave a short, bitter laugh. "I didn't trust *myself*, my reactions to you. I can see that now." He drew his hand away, sitting back on his haunches. "I cold-shouldered you because I was afraid. Afraid that if you broke down on me I would no longer be able to see you as being fit for command. Afraid of all that implied. And because I never acknowledged the fears I let them paralyse me, without even knowing what I was doing. I chose instead to pretend

that none of it had happened."

"You think I can't understand that reaction? The belief that if you close your eyes it'll all go away? Only it doesn't."

"I know that. And now..." The set of Riker's face and the stiffness of his posture expressed his feelings with perfect clarity. "Now I'm angry. No, not at you. At me, at them - at the damned Borg, because they caused this."

"And I suppose I should caution you on not letting emotions cloud your judgement, only..." Picard released a long, slow breath and looked down at his hands as if in his mind he still saw the lethal tools the Borg had made of them. "Only I'm in no position to be objective about this."

"After what they did to you - "

"It goes beyond that. I'm not talking about vengeance, Will, I'm talking about justice. All the worlds, all the cultures they've assimilated... I believe the Borg should be destroyed. Utterly. Completely. No redemption." There was a bitter glint to Picard's eyes as he looked back up at Riker. "You see, they taught me to hate. And I've learned that lesson so well that I'm not sure when, if ever, I'll be able to unlearn it."

"Will any of us?"

Picard chose not to answer - or maybe he simply had none to give. His gaze lifted and went to the dim purpled silhouettes of the distant mountains, their high summits wreathed in skeins of morning mist. Then he looked back at Riker. "I asked you once before what you were still doing on board the Enterprise."

Riker half-smiled at that, some of the tension slackening out of him as he adopted a more comfortable cross-legged

position opposite Picard. "And I asked if you were telling me to leave."

"I wasn't," Picard said quickly and without hesitation, "and now I'm asking you to stay." He fixed Riker with a steady gaze. "You're ready to work without a net, Will, but right now... I'm not sure I am."

"Oh, I think you are," Riker said, and his lips curved into a smile. "Beverly and Deanna were right - we did need to talk, needed to clear the air - but I think we're under-estimating you. With respect, I think you're under-estimating yourself too, sir."

"Even after this?" Picard's expression held a certain amount of surprise at Riker's reaction. "Don't be misled, Will, I might have it all worked out in here - " he tapped his head - "but no amount of intellectual understanding can speed the process of recovery. And self-knowledge doesn't kill those damned dreams."

"So you had a nightmare," Riker said, his grin deepening. "And look at you now. You've pulled yourself together again faster than any other man I know could have done. You think I could doubt you now? I know it's not all going to be plain sailing from now on, but I trust you to ride the storms." Riker's expression was abruptly serious, and the look that fixed Picard held no more hesitation. "Captain, it will be my honour to share that voyage with you."

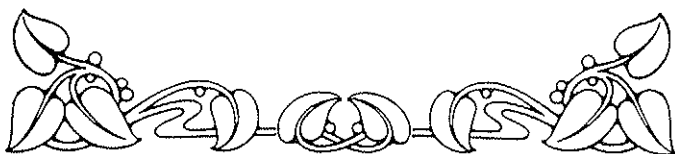
Picard looked faintly uncomfortable for a moment, and then he smiled. For the first time in a long while the smile reached his eyes and they were untouched by shadows. Riker relaxed, conscious of a matching peace and a newfound sense of ease in his own mind.

Then he yawned and stretched, feeling the faint light of the new day beginning to tickle at his back, the pale-gold face of the sun peering blearily over the rim of the sky. His senses began to twitch, as if he'd just wakened from a long and troubled sleep. "I don't know about you, but I don't feel like sleeping any more. Why don't we wake ourselves up properly and go for a swim?"

The grass under their feet was sprinkled with damp pearls of dew and the rocks were cold and clammy to their touch. By a silent accord they quickened their step and almost ran the final few paces to the pool. It lay gleaming before them like a new-opened eye, the water winking in strands of shimmering cobalt and polished emerald.

Riker took a deep breath, then paused as he felt the quick light pressure of Picard's fingers on his shoulder. He looked up into the older man's eyes and matched the warmth of the look he saw there with one of his own.

They dived together, and the dreams and the darkness drowned in the cool and blinding shock of spray and water.



REMEMBRANCE

No lies, K'Ehleyr, from you -
 Nor was there truth.
 (The scent of you
 Sweet in my nostrils still...)
 You would not take
 The Oath... Forsworn
 Were you. I stung from your
 Scorn - words like a
 Sword in my guts.
 "Klingon nonsense..."
 (I remember the flame
 In your eyes, consuming
 Us both...)
 "I am not complete without
 You..."

But you died...
 And left me a son -
 A legacy
 I knew nothing of;
 Had never looked for.
 (The taste of your
 Skin, your sweat on my
 Tongue...)
 "I'm a part of you, too..."
 Words which rattle - they cry
 Like Death, the howl in my throat;
 They are
 Hollow to me...
 Now.

I killed for you,
 K'Ehleyr.
 (The feel of you beneath me -
 Moving, like ripples of silk, in
 Time with the beat of our hearts...)
 "If you cannot be his father... at least
 Be his friend..."
 And would, again, a
 Million times, if I...
 We... could have you
 Back.

Gaile Wood

AND I DREAMED I WAS AN EAGLE

by

Brenda Kelsey

The file had cost her dearly, but the price paid by the thief had been far higher, and much more permanent. She was wise in the ways of her people. Any weakness in foe or friend was examined, analysed and exploited when the greatest return could be expected. She'd simply analysed the thief, found his record to be adequate and used him. His elimination, and that of his accomplices, had brought her an unexpected bonus in the contents of the records which they had kept.

People did the most unexpected things.

She would not have thought it possible for a high-born soldier, one with such a distinctive record too, to be a believer of the Vulcan heresies.

Careful checking by her own trusted agents had proved to her satisfaction that Proconsul Neral was working for the Emperor. Gathering evidence on those who truly did believe so that, when the time was right, the whole organisation could be destroyed.

She had watched and waited. Had gathered her own lists and set up her own limited contacts with the crazys. One never wasted any potential advantage.

Her skills and her background (which made her easily dispensable) had made her the perfect choice as contact for the Klingon family Duras. Her reports, scathingly honest - her own unique trademark in an Empire mad with lies - about the abilities of the Family and the most probable outcome of the scheme, had made it possible for her to plan a

successful disaster limitation scenario for when the foretold collapse of the rebellion had taken place. She managed to withdraw her entire staff in such a way that no absolute evidence of Romulan interference had been left behind. Of course she'd had to abandon the sisters as scapegoats, but in their turn they had abandoned the bastard son of their father and so had made their escape, providing a neat and conveniently absent focus for the rage of the new Klingon leader Gowron.

She had survived. The next months had proved interesting as those bright ones amongst the Romulans had interested themselves in the doings of the unexpectedly gifted half-breed. She had been given tasks that fell in her scope of expertise and had carried them out in the faultless perfection that was expected of all servants of the Empire. The training given to her by her father had been more than ample. Satisfied that they knew both her abilities and her loyalty the watchers had turned their attention to other less capable prey.

The rumours had reached her first. Fragments from the crazys, hinting at a Vulcan visitor. A teacher, one long promised. The summons from Neral and the information that Spock had come to Romulus, had brought a wolfish grin of sheer expectation to her lips. To take him! To use him!

She had had to fight hard to hide her disappointment when she was informed that plans had already been discussed, decided and acted upon. The sheer scope had helped. To capture

Spock and to use him to capture Vulcan!

She'd turned the plans over in her mind, examined them for any flaws as any prudent Romulan would, and had found so many that her first instinct had been to denounce them. Only her knowledge of the privileged place held by Neral in the Emperor's own organisation had stayed her protests. Then, when she'd examined the plans again she'd found that they were a double-edged sword. Not one plan, but several. Yes, capture Spock, use him to take Vulcan certainly, and if that plan should fail? Why, let the half-breed escape and let him act as the Teacher, to make the believers in the Vulcan Heresies stronger!

The plan was a long term plan to destroy Vulcan as well as a short term one. What better way to destroy Vulcan than to force Vulcans to change themselves, to create havoc in the Federation by joining with a changed Empire, and then to find out much too late that the Empire had not changed at all!

Her own part in the plan had been simplicity itself. The capture of Spock, and when required, his release in the form of a successful escape. The unexpected talents of Picard and Data had given her the option that she had sought, one that would not mean her automatic execution. It had taken some interesting manoeuvring to set up the correct and most efficacious series of events. Her coded warnings to the crazys, seemingly from Neral (now a proved triple agent working against the Emperor) had sent the majority of the people on Neral's own list of heretics into hiding. Of course the lists that the Emperor had used were not Neral's, but those of her own devising, which left in place certain very high ranking personnel indeed. The massacre that had followed Spock's escape had been smaller than that planned by Neral

but then he got the blame for that, too. It was merely more evidence against him. There had been some casualties, but then in any war there were always casualties.

And she had survived.

Certainly her reputation had not been enhanced by the encounter but she was alive. And that was what was important. To be alive.

Her mother had known that. She'd trained her very carefully, that distant memory. She'd trained the tiny half-breed who'd inherited her own blue eyes and blonde hair in the skills that she'd learned in her own tormented childhood, the skills that her child would need to survive in the Empire alone. She'd known that she had so little time to act in, known that interest in an exotic would fade and that then the spurious protection of the father, her captor, would be withdrawn from the child too.

She leaned back in the chair and closed her eyes, conjuring up the image of her mother, building her in her mind, the bruises, the scars, the scent of the medicines which had always hung about her. And she thought of the kindness and the gentleness that only that one prisoner of war had ever shown her. She remembered the last hugs and whispered assurances, the kiss and the hastily wiped tears, and then she'd obeyed her mother and screamed out, yelling for her father to rescue her.

It had worked. Her mother had been tortured and killed in front of her, and she'd clung to the man who ordered it to be done, who was her father and her only chance of survival, and had sworn silent oath after silent oath with all the fervour generated by a child's broken heart that they would pay.

That they would all pay.

She sighed, opened her eyes and sat up, pulled the little projector out of its hiding place and flipped up the first of the two pictures that the thief and his accomplices had given their lives for. Ambassador Sarek and his Human wife Amanda, and their child Spock. Mother had spoken of him often, the man whose brilliance as Head of Operations at Starfleet had led to the survival of the Federation for longer than the Klingons and the Federation had believed possible.

She'd had a lot of problems with the twisted tale of mutable time that her mother had tried to explain to the little child. She'd finally understood many years later and had searched out information about the counterpart of that brilliant warrior. She admitted to herself that she was fascinated by him. This too was a Human/Vulcanoid half-breed, and only see what he had accomplished. And now he was here on Romulus, and free!

She flipped up the other, infinitely more precious picture. The blonde hair was disordered by a strong wind, the mouth tipped upwards in a tiny smile, the blue eyes alight with a roguish glee that leaped out of the picture. She was leaning, arms folded across her chest, against the android Data, who was simply standing there. The innocence and fellowship and freedom burned at something deep inside her.

This is what her mother could have been. If the Romulans had not attacked the defenceless Klingon outpost (where was the honour in that?). If the Enterprise-C had not fought the

Romulans to a standstill and if they had not escaped with only a few prisoners in return for that loss of three ships instead of the planned escalation of the tension between the Federation and the Klingon Empire.

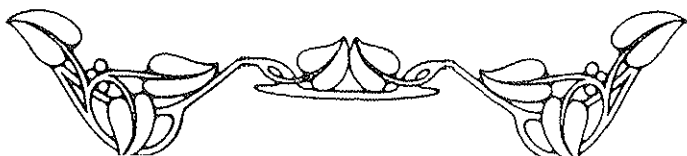
She knew that because of the time loop both women were the same person. Her mother. The warrior maid and the untamed prisoner. And she was their daughter, and had inherited all the fierce individualism of both.

"Well, Mother. It seems that I have an ally in my fight against the Empire. Another half-breed, just like me." She smiled. It would be ironic if the pair of them did manage to destroy the Empire. She'd have to be very careful. Spock was as brilliant in this time-line as in the one her mother had described. Spock must never be given the slightest clue that he had an ally. Not yet, anyway. She'd have to wait until they'd succeeded. It would take a long time, but she could wait and watch and learn and exploit the weaknesses of her foes and her friends.

"I'll be good Mother. I'll be so very good. I promise."

She flipped the projector off and slipped it away back into its hiding place and got on with her work. The men who had replaced Pardek and Neral had to be investigated. And she had her work to do as a good and loyal subject of the Empire.

She could wait. She was very good at it.



OF EMPATHY

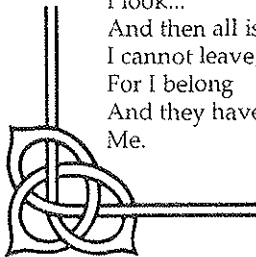
I sleep...
 And still I hear a thousand
 Cries. Each flight of
 Fancy,
 Each whimsy whispers
 Soft like snow in
 My ear, and makes the crew
 Complete.

I wake...
 And feel all which breathes...
 The pangs of birth,
 A tender lover's kiss,
 Friendship...
 And every bitter-sweet grief
 Which haunts me to pain of
 Death.

I watch...
 And all are plain in the
 Sight of me.
 They know me not, though I
 Know them.
 Neither their hate
 Nor their deceit
 Can hide from my dark
 Gaze.

I seek...
 And find no haven for my
 Questing mind.
 Each feeling clear...
 With all restraints cut
 Loose. Ribbons round my thoughts
 Tie me, here, to these I
 Love.

I look...
 And then all is clear -
 I cannot leave,
 For I belong
 And they have need of
 Me.



Gaile Wood

TRIPTYCH

by

P.J.Poole

Captain's Personal Log, Stardate 45951.4

The dream again last night, essentially the same as every night for the last two weeks, ever since our... my... encounter with the Hitaan probe. I saw myself, helplessly looking on whilst Locutus destroyed my 'wife', my 'children' and the entire Hitaan culture... assimilating it into the Borg, whilst they screamed for me to save them. I woke, close to screaming myself, and could not sleep again for hours.

It is an intolerable situation which must eventually affect my performance and my capabilities as Captain of the Enterprise. In order to address the situation I have summoned Dr Crusher, Commander Riker and Counselor Troi to a meeting in my Ready Room.

Riker was last to arrive, nodding brief apology to the others as he sat. He noticed, not for the first time, how drawn and pale Picard appeared.

"I have called you all here today because I am faced with a problem." Picard's voice was cool and dry, the tone he used for impersonal dissection of unpleasant necessities. "A problem which, whilst essentially personal, has ramifications which may affect my ability to continue as commanding officer of this vessel."

Riker sat forward, tensing as he heard those words. He had known that something was disturbing the Captain but had not realised that it was anything so serious. Deanna and Beverly Crusher, on the other hand, simply nodded calmly and waited for the Captain to continue.

"I have been experiencing... difficulty... in sleeping - ever since our encounter with the Hitaan probe. Dr Crusher has been treating the physical symptoms, but the underlying problem of my nightmares still continues."

"Bad dreams?" Riker sounded both relieved and incredulous. "You seriously mean to say that you feel a few bad dreams can call into question your fitness to command?"

Picard seemed lost for words, and Riker felt dismay at the sight of his Captain - his friend, dammit - so unusually inarticulate.

Deanna broke the awkward silence, leaning forward to pull the others into similar postures, using body language to transform them from officers at a briefing into a circle of friends helping one another.

"Will, this is about more than just bad dreams. The Hitaan used the probe's systems to implant actual memories into the Captain's brain. In many ways, those implanted memories are as real as any true, experienced memories that you or I might have. That implantation may have caused no physiological damage, and it seems that whilst he is awake the Captain has no difficulty in distinguishing

between real and implanted thoughts, but his subconscious is also accessing those memories, and seems unable to differentiate so clearly." She paused and glanced at Picard, compassion in her eyes as she saw him nod once, firmly, giving silent permission for her to continue. "That, in and of itself, might not present a problem - could in fact just lead to a more active, but generally pleasant level of dream activity - but something within the Captain's mind is equating the Hitaan memories with an earlier occasion on which alien thought patterns were imposed upon it."

"The Borg." Riker's tone was flat and cold. He looked steadily at Picard, feeling an embarrassed awkwardness which he had had always found to be there in any potential discussion of the time Picard had spent as their prisoner... their pawn. He took a deep breath before speaking. "I know we've never discussed that time in great personal detail, Captain, but I understood that you had come to terms with what happened. That the experience had been..."

"Assimilated?" offered Picard as his First Officer's voice petered out. "With considerable help from Counselor Troi, that is fundamentally true. The memory is there, it is... *unpleasant*, but it happened as something forcefully imposed upon me. I can accept that, and that it was not my choice, or my... my fault. That understanding allows me to accept it and get on with my life, even on subconscious levels it seemed, until this second intrusion. However, it now seems that there are three of 'me' fighting for space in a brain that will hold at most just two!"

Troi smiled warm encouragement at the wry smile with which Picard ended that statement. "Somewhat oversimplified, Captain, but essentially correct. The meditative and other mental disciplines that I would normally suggest

for someone in this situation do not seem particularly effective either. The parts of your mind must make peace if you are to recover the composure and equilibrium essential to good mental health - "

"Which we all know is a prerequisite for good physical health," concluded Beverly. "I have tried the usual relaxation programs and even a mild sedative, but your sleep and dream patterns are still distorted by the underlying conflict; and I am not prepared to resort to stronger medication either to knock you out or to keep you awake so long as you wish to retain command." Her tone left no room for debate, and the looks that she and the Captain exchanged left Riker in no doubt that there had been an earlier, more private, discussion of the topic.

Riker stroked his beard in a gesture indicative of thought, then asked, "Beverly, are you sure there are no physiological aspects to the problem? Nothing about the way that the probe implanted the new memories?"

Crusher shook her head firmly. "Human memory is chemical, mainly RNA based, and whilst certain parts of the brain are associated with certain types of thought process, individual memories do not reside in any particular area. The probe basically caused Jean-Luc's own body to produce RNA patterns, based on its programming, from his own brain tissues. The only difference I can distinguish is that although these memories are supposedly more recent than his real memory they are accessed after real memory during normal thought processing, by some kind of deliberate tagging of the probe memory."

Seeing the puzzlement on Riker's face, Picard tried to explain more clearly. "Number One, the probe created memories of my vanishing from the

Enterprise to appear on Hitaan and to live out the rest of my life there for almost thirty-five years. Logically, once I returned here - even though I never left - my memories of the ship, my duties, all of you, should have been decades old; but that is not the case. My memory is correct in linear time, rather than in subjective 'experienced' time. The memories implanted are accessible as memory, but they require the kind of concentration to invoke as one would associate with decades-old experience."

Troi nodded agreement. "Yet once the Captain has made the effort, or under light hypnosis, the memories are there in full detail. In several sessions, we have made records of the smallest detail of how the Hitaan people lived."

Ruefully, Picard also nodded. "It is fascinating to the archaeologist in me, and to several of the research staff on board. Just by talking from memory I can produce data that would take years of conventional research to unearth about a truly remarkable culture - one that is now totally extinct."

Dr Crusher seemed less impressed. "A culture that acted with ethical irresponsibility verging on the criminal!" Seeing the puzzlement again on Riker's face, she continued, "It was pure chance that the probe encountered a ship of Humans and that we are similar enough to them as regards chemistry and brain function for its programming to be successful. If the probe had tried to implant memory into a Gorn or a Tellarite it would have killed them stone dead. A Klingon would be insane. The arrogance and presumption of assuming that any life forms encountered in space would be similar to their own..."

"Goes only to show how desperate we were!" interrupted the Captain. "The grasp of astronautics and xenobiology

that the Hitaan lacked was typical of their stage of development. Once they knew that their world was doomed, they had to at least try to save something of themselves for posterity."

"Which brings us back to our problem," stated Deanna. "From your memory of them we can tell that the Hitaan had almost no subconscious brain functions. They were a well adjusted, artistic, expressive people who did not need the secondary levels of behaviour that typify Human thought. They were able to deal with the world far more openly than we do; there were no monsters from the id on their world, and indeed the very technology within the probe was derived from a technique which they originally used as a form of artistic communication and expression. It is unfortunate that whilst the physiological compatibility between Human and Hitaan brain structure allowed the transfer of information, the differences in brain function, the mind if you will, is psychologically incompatible."

"Allow me to assure you, Counselor, that 'unfortunate' is a considerable understatement," said Picard grimly. "Will, the only things allowing me to function at the moment are Deanna's help and the lessons I recall from my experience of mind melding with Ambassador Sarek. With lack of sleep exacerbating the situation daily, I see little option other than to relinquish command pending full medical and psychological assessment!"

"Now just a minute!" Riker's voice was strident with emotion. "It's all well and good for you to say that and make it sound like a simple matter of getting over a bad case of the 'flu, but you know it wouldn't be that simple if you relinquish command on those grounds!" Behind his words was the memory, shared by all in

the room though never openly discussed, of how close Picard had come to losing his command after the Locutus episode. Many important figures in the Federation would have been willing to see the man who led the Borg forces at Wolf 359 quietly shuffled sideways into some obscure posting at a far distant Starbase or other deep space assignment. Only Picard's popularity as the hero of the attack on Earth, plus the use of numerous 'favours' he had accrued within Starfleet's internal political systems, had allowed him to stay on as Captain of the ship. Any admission of psychological problems affecting his command abilities would make it almost impossible to reinstate him again.

"It's also academic when you know there is a good chance that I can resolve the problem with a relatively simple process - if you will just consent to that process, Jean-Luc!" Crusher's voice held an anger which she seldom allowed to emerge, but which now seemed very close to the surface. Riker now looked totally confused, whilst Troi and the Captain wore expressions of chagrin and stubbornness.

"I thought you had said that there was no physiological aspect to the problem?" queried Riker.

Crusher pursed her lips in irritation. "The presence of the probe-generated memories is the problem. I'm quite certain that with simple modifications I can use Dr Pulaski's memory erasure process to simply delete those memories!"

"The procedure she used on Data's 'pen-pal', Sarjenka? But I thought that was only effective on short term memory?" Riker was still confused.

"That's the modification. I'm 90% certain that I can modify her technique to recognise the probe memories, by virtue

of the tagging effect I mentioned earlier. Even if that percentage doesn't pay off, there is no risk to the Captain - we'll just be back to where we are now."

Riker looked at the faces of those present before addressing the Captain. "So what is your objection to this option, Captain?"

Picard seemed almost haunted, indecision evident in his eyes and voice as he finally replied. "The probe memories are all that remain of the Hitaan. In all honesty, can I claim the right to destroy them?"

"How can you ask that?" Riker's confusion was evident. "The Hitaan implanted those memories with no real concern for your well-being, and without your permission. It could cost you anything from your position to your very sanity to keep them. Good Lord, Jean-Luc, you have to let Beverly try to erase them!"

The Commander's inadvertent use of his Christian name seemed to startle Picard enough to allow him to take a firmer grasp on the situation. "Thank you, Will. I appreciate the candour of your opinion, but it really is a decision I must face alone. What I called you here for is to inform you that I will be taking a short leave of absence from the Enterprise. Beverly will be accompanying me to Starbase 137, and will try a number of procedures in the hope that one of them will alleviate the situation. If those are not successful, then I will decide on whether or not to undergo the memory erasure process. You will take the centre seat in my absence."

Riker gave a grunt, part response to the temporary promotion, part frustration at the certainty that Picard was not going to commit himself further at this time.

There were details to arrange and other routine matters that Picard took the opportunity to hand over to Riker and Deanna, but it was still only a short while later that Picard concluded the meeting.

Dr Crusher and Riker left together, but Deanna lingered to speak to the Captain alone. Realising her intent, Picard quelled the urge, born of tiredness, to tell her to go. Instead he sat back in his chair and listened with eyes closed.

"It is possible that our efforts to access the Hitaan memories in order for you to narrate them as archaeological data has enhanced their presence. If we stop that, and once Beverly has been able to resolve your body's physical need for sleep, the problem may just go away."

"But if it doesn't?" asked Picard, sensing that this was where the conversation was determined to go.

"Then Will is right, and you must erase them. Before you can do that though, you must admit why you do not wish to do that, which is not a matter of ethics or scientific duty."

The silence sat in the room, an uncomfortable thing, until Picard finally broke it.

"They are as real to me as my own family. A man is the sum of his experiences, his memories, the emotions associated with events. I lived there for years - I had friends, a wife, even children for pity's sake!! And I would... *miss*

them... If I... if I have to leave them again..." Picard seemed to experience an almost physical pain in speaking those words.

Deanna waited a few moments before speaking. "The whole point of the erasure is that you would *not* miss them. It would be as if it never happened, which is the truth - the *real* truth of what happened, Captain."

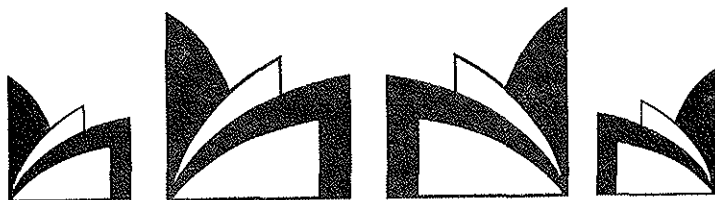
Picard gasped, a laugh that was almost a sob. "You speak of truth. Is truth unchanging laws? We both have truths, are mine the same as yours? They are real to me... even though I know they are total fabrication. And I have always maintained that Starfleet's first duty must be to the truth above all things. Is that what you wanted me to say?"

There was no anger in the question, only that terrible weariness and a sense of resignation.

Deanna stood, leaned over and squeezed the Captain's hands where they clenched together on top of his desk. As she walked to the door she paused and turned to him.

"No. But I know that it is what you needed to hear from your own lips, and not from another's."

She left him then, alone in his Ready Room. Or, on reflection, not alone at all - but perhaps more ready than previously.



MEMORIES OF EARTH

The faces stare back.

Some laughing.
Some smiling.
Some excited.
Some serious.

All belonging.

I feel I should know you,
Because you are a part
Of what I am.
But the anonymous figures
And unfamiliar names
Mean nothing to me.
I try to understand you,
To look behind the pose
At the world you inhabit.
But you are all strangers.
A heritage beyond my grasp.

Would you understand me?
The part-Betazoid.
The empath.
The Starfleet officer.
Never truly belonging
To any culture.
My world is in the stars.
I have another family
Here on the Enterprise
With whom I do belong.



My life
Would be as alien to you
As these photographs
Are to me.
We are worlds apart.
But, perhaps,
That is as it should be.

Jenny Howsam



THE POSITRONIC DREAM MADE FLESH

by

Carol Sterenberg

The pitiless glare of the overhead lighting threw solid black shadows beneath the two stretchers in the centre of the room. On one of them lay the naked body of a man, as fine as the alabaster body on a medieval tomb, his slight body perfect and bloodless, the waxen face pale further by the dark hair framing it. The stretcher alongside was occupied by another man, old, fully clothed, lying curled like a foetus deep in sleep.

A dream jolted him awake with a sudden stifled exclamation, and he squinted in momentary uncertainty at the body alongside. A slow smile curled his thin lips, spreading up to the blue eyes beneath their greying, shaggy brows.

The old man levered himself upright and stretched, with a groan and an almost-audible creaking of joints. He dropped to the floor and scuttled stiffly over to the body on the stretcher. He patted the lifeless face gently with one wrinkled hand, and with the other he reached beneath the body. There was an almost imperceptible click, and the eyes of the corpse flicked open. Its yellow eyes stared at the ceiling, unfocussed.

Its mouth opened, and in a calm, well-modulated voice it observed, "All systems nominal. All systems operating within specified parameters."

The old man cackled in glee. "Good morning, son."

"Good morning, Father."

"Today's the day. Today I fit the final circuits. Human behaviour patterns - The Basics. Happy Birthday!"

"If there's no other business, I think we can adjourn." Karl Jurgens, the leader of Omicron Theta's farming community, swept a swift glance along the faces around the big refectory table, hoping to avoid Yasuko Ozu's eye. But she was not easily deterred. She cleared her throat. "Actually, there is some business I'd like to discuss, Karl."

Jurgens sighed inwardly but his expression remained composed. He knew what was worrying her. In fact, he'd been trying to ignore the promptings of his conscience for days past.

She raised a hand as if to forestall his objections. "I know - my department is agronomy. But, although I'm not responsible for community health, I feel somebody has to take an interest in our more... reclusive members." Her dark, heavy hair flapped about her grave, thin face as she leaned forward determinedly on her elbows. "We're a small and isolated community. We can't afford to ignore anyone. What are we going to do about Doctor Soong?"

There was a murmur from the other committee members. Linton Odiwe turned to Jurgens and said, "Yasuko's right to be concerned, Karl. Soong's been holed up in that lab suite of his for the last week, behind locked doors. I don't

know what he's been eating or drinking all that time."

"Linton, I do believe you're worried about him."

Odiwe shrugged. "He's a cantankerous old devil, but I don't want to see him drop dead."

"You remember what he called us when we tried to feed him last time."

"He was a bit overwrought," Yasuko said quickly.

"A bit barmy if you ask me. He's completely flipped. All this business about a positronic brain - pure fantasy."

Yasuko frowned. "I don't know about that. I'm no cyberneticist, but what he said sounded convincing enough. And he's got the drive to do it."

"You mean he still wants to justify himself," her husband Kenji retorted hotly. It was evidently a disagreement they'd had before, and it was clear from his tone that he had no sympathy to spare for Soong.

Yasuko was not exactly sympathetic either, but she had a strong sense of duty and fairness. "Ken, anyone who could flee in humiliation to a place like this must be powerfully motivated."

"Poor old Often-Wrong," Odiwe said softly, with a shake of his grizzled head. "We can't let him starve himself to death."

Jurgens ran a meaty hand through his close-cropped, grey-flecked hair. "No. You're right. I'll go along there. Alone. See if I can gain his confidence, then persuade him to come out and join us for dinner. Or at least allow me to bring him

some food."

Jurgens entered the corridor at the end of the lab block. His footsteps echoed, bouncing from the solid rock walls, as he walked toward the suite of labs inhabited by Doctor Noonian Soong. He wasn't sure what to expect. His vivid imagination had pictured the old man dead of exhaustion and starvation. What he did find was totally unexpected.

As he turned the corner, he heard a thin, reedy voice raised in song. An ancient song, from what he could judge. He shivered as he heard the sound, although the words were not in the least sinister.

"But of all, the most valiant, or so
I've been told
Was Ivan Skobinski Skobar . . ."

Poor old guy, he thought. He's finally gone potty. And then another voice repeated the refrain. A young, strong voice.

"But of all, the most valiant, or so
I've been told
Was Ivan Skobinski Skobar . . ."

This was followed by a burst of laughter, high and cracked, almost triumphant, and the two voices repeated the song in unison. This time there were two voices laughing.

Jurgens rubbed the goose pimples from his arms. Who the hell had managed to gain old Soong's confidence? Persuaded him to open the door, rescued him from his self-imposed incarceration? The voice didn't sound familiar.

He stretched his hand toward the door chime, hesitated for a moment, and pressed it. There was a brief, whispered

consultation within, and the sound of footsteps approaching. The door opened. A stranger's face appeared. Jurgens had hardly time to register the impossibility of this, when he noticed that the stranger was stark naked. His brain reeled.

"Do come in." The stranger's voice was carefully neutral.

"Ah - Doctor Jurgens. You have anticipated my invitation. But no matter." Soong sidled up to the mystified scientist. "Doctor, I would like to present to you - my son."

Jurgens stared. He felt totally out of his depth, but good manners got the better of his confusion, and he extended a rather unsteady hand. It was gripped, not uncomfortably hard, in a pleasantly warm hand, and shaken for precisely the correct period of time. Jurgens still had not spoken. He tore his eyes away from the stranger's, mutely beseeching Soong for some explanation.

"My son, Jurgens. Not the fruit of my loins, but of my mind. The positronic dream made flesh."

Jurgens fought down a feeling of unreality. "Doctor Soong - I can only congratulate you, and welcome your son - um - " He faltered, and added, "I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name."

"Ah, yes." Soong turned to the young man. "Well? Have you chosen a name for yourself?"

His son turned his golden gaze upon Jurgens. "You may call me Lore."

Yasuko saw Casey entering the refectory, and waved at him from her seat near the window. He paused to pour himself a cup of coffee, and crossed to

join the group at her table. He yanked a chair into position and slammed himself heavily into it.

"You look annoyed," Yasuko observed neutrally.

"I am annoyed," Casey growled. "Bloody annoyed."

Kenji grinned, rather maliciously. "I bet I know why. It's Lore, isn't it?"

"How did you know?"

"It's always Lore. He has a talent for annoying people."

"He always looks so superior. I said as much to him, and he just asked why he should deny the truth. I can't stand his smug complacency."

For some reason Yasuko felt compelled to defend Lore. "Maybe you'd feel complacent if you held the sum total of human knowledge on so many different subjects, between your ears."

Casey snorted. "Pity Old Often-Wrong didn't include humility and tact in The Basics, or the knowledge of Human nature. Sure, Lore's superior to us in every way, but he might just keep that to himself once in a while. I think sometimes he just doesn't realise how irritating he is. He's offered me gratuitous advice on every subject under the sun."

"Perhaps it's his way of trying to be friendly," Yasuko suggested.

"You're on his side, aren't you?" Ozu made it almost an accusation.

Yasuko rolled her eyes. "Ken, I'm trying to imagine he's a non-Human Federation member. That helps. Ours is too small a colony to accommodate

intolerance. On the other hand, though, it's large enough to avoid people one can't get along with."

"Oh, I think I could manage to keep my distance," Casey replied. "Along with a lot of other people. He's running out of people to annoy."

"It's quite ironic, really," Odiwe observed. "None of us believed Soong could pull off this positronic brain. If you'd asked me what I expected the thing to look like, I'd have said a big square machine. Lore's so - Human."

"Yeah - too Human," Casey sighed. He was so placid he could rub along with anyone, but Lore was defeating even his good nature.

"A good night's sleep might help," Odiwe suggested.

"I think a glass of what you're drinking would be even better."

Odiwe's perfect, beautiful teeth flashed in a grin. "This'll make you sleep well, too."

Lore perched on a high stool at the workbench, negligently swinging his feet, as Soong tried to concentrate on an intricate circuit board. "Father, I don't understand why you're here. How does a scientist like yourself come to work on a benighted planet such as this? There are no cyberneticists here. The colonists appear to be simple agriculturalists."

Soong sighed. "It's a long story," he replied. "Maybe one of these days I'll tell you all about it."

"And why do they call you Old Often-Wrong?"

Soong turned smartly and paused in his work. "Who told you that? And do they still call me that?"

"All of them."

There was a short but heavy silence, and Soong laid down his micro-welder. "Lore, maybe this is the time to explain, after all. You see, all my life I've been fired by the dream of a positronic brain. Worked at it with my colleagues for years, experiment after experiment. I maintained that it could be done, in the face of constant scepticism from the entire scientific community. My colleagues gradually lost faith, left me one by one to work on realities, left me to my dream. But my dream kept me strong. I grew old in the pursuit of it. I never once doubted myself. I knew, you see... I knew.

"At last I found their constant cretinous criticism too distracting. There was nothing for it but to leave, to find a quieter place to pursue my studies. A place where my reputation had not preceded me. A place where I could work in peace. This is that place, Lore."

"But how could you bear the society of such imbeciles?"

"I haven't sought out their company. But, Lore, they took me in, sheltered me, supported me, a non-productive member of the community. I shall always be grateful to them for that. And although you despise their intelligence, they have one Human characteristic in great quantities - courage.

"It took courage to prise themselves from the security of their homeworlds, to come to this new colony planet, freshly emerged from the hands of the terraformers. They knew they were leaving behind their families, their very societies, for ever. All they had in return

was the strength of their conviction that they could make things work here.

"That's what sustained them when the first year's crops failed. That sustained them when three children drowned in the first monsoon. They are good people, Lore. There are more types of strength than the physical or intellectual. Do not underestimate them. In fact," he added, turning his piercing gaze upon Lore, "you could learn a lot from them."

Lore was plainly unconvinced. "If they're such wonderful people, why have you never settled here, taken a wife from among them and started a family?"

"That, Lore, is another story, and one I fear I haven't time to go into right now. Don't you have a project of your own to work on?"

Lore could see that Soong was anxious to progress. He took the hint and left.

In the inky void of interstellar space, a Being is travelling in search of food. Although the emissions of the electromagnetic spectrum in which it is bathed are a support and comfort to it, there is no nourishment in them. Its energy source is the life force of others. And when it finds a food source, that source is completely destroyed, exhausted by its ravenous appetite, no matter how many lives it absorbs.

The inorganic matter it takes up is incorporated into its crystalline matrix. The mental energy extracted by it, the driving force of the lives it has consumed, fuels its motion. The Crystal Entity is a beautiful creature, but unwittingly deadly to all life. Its appetite is insatiable.

It is searching, its senses alert for any flash of organised energy that may denote thought: it is hungry, not only for food but also

for a fellow-mind, for companionship, for understanding.

"Father - "

"What is it now, Lore? Can't you see I'm busy? Can't it wait?"

"I waited as long as I could."

Soong sighed impatiently, and reluctantly inserted his finger into the notebook he was consulting.

"Make is quick, please, Lore?"

"Something's wrong with me."

"What?"

"I don't know. I feel... a sort of incompleteness. A lack."

"Doesn't sound too serious to me."

"It is serious. It occupies the forefront of my processing, no matter what I do."

"A lack? But you lack nothing. You are entirely self-sufficient. A lack of what?"

"I don't know."

Soong paused, stroked his chin, considering. "You seem to require my attention more than I'd anticipated. What you are experiencing is loneliness." He bent his head to the notebook again. "I can't help you."

"But you created me. You called me into being. Don't I have some right to your attention?"

Soong sighed in exasperation. "Like all offspring, you must exist

independently. It's the nature of humanity to be alone. Even in company, you are alone. You have only yourself. You must make your own life. You can't depend on anyone for anything."

"But I'm not just lonely," Lore replied, with a note of desperation in his voice. "It's a sort of yearning in me. I feel I need another person to share my existence."

Lore watched the back of Soong's neck reddening. At length Soong said, "It sounds as if it's love you need. After all, that's part of the Human condition. And you have the capacity to love."

"Love. A wife." Lore mulled the unfamiliar concept in his mind. "I shall remedy the situation this afternoon. Tell me how to woo a woman."

"You're talking to the wrong person there, Lore. I never had time for love. Love was a luxury I couldn't afford. With me, it's been work, always work, and I've no regrets. Women slow you down."

His curiosity fired by Soong's unprecedented candour, Lore asked, "Did you never want children? Real children, flesh and blood?"

Soong shook his head emphatically. "I doubted my ability to be a 'good' father."

"What's a 'good' father?"

Soong considered the question carefully. "Well, now... Loving, of course. But above all, willing to devote time to his child. I have too much of my own life to live, I've no time or energy to spare for anyone else. My work is my lover, my child, my friends, my family."

"Hence your desperate need for vindication."

"If you like." Soong paused for thought. It was the first time he'd really questioned his decision to remain childless and unattached. "I didn't want to waste energy on children. You, Lore, should not require my attention. You are an adult, an independent being with access to the sum total of Human knowledge." But even as he said this, Soong knew that Lore was a child in his understanding of humanity. A lonely, angry child. A dangerous child.

Lore was shaking his head angrily. "So rational, so logical. There's more to it than that. Isn't there? You haven't a Human instinct in you. You're the machine. I'm the person."

"That's enough!"

"Your Human heart, your steaming blood, your glands and juices, all are wasted on you. You don't know how to live. I'm the one who's suffering the torments of humanity. You've never felt a thing. You've been dead for years, you just didn't know it."

"Stop it!"

"You know something, Father? You were right not to have children. You are not a good father. In fact, you're the most selfish person I know. All your thoughts and feelings are for yourself."

"That's not true."

"Have you ever loved?"

"Lore, stop this."

"I thought not. You're less Human than I am."

"No."

"You made me yearn for something I can never have - the love of a woman."

Help me."

"Lore, not now. I'm busy."

"That's your last word on the subject?"

"For now."

Without another word, Lore turned and stalked out of the lab.

Soong ducked around the end of the workbench and made to follow him, but thought better of it. His legs were quivering from the effects of adrenalin and anger. Lore's bitter words had stirred him up as never before, and all the long-buried feelings seethed anew. He felt slightly sick. He poured himself a glass of water with a shaking hand and forced it down, trying to put all that had transpired out of his mind. No time to mull it over now.

He had been right not to father children. Now that Lore existed, he had no idea how to treat his creation. Lore was as demanding as any child could have been. How could he concentrate on his work?

Yasuko turned from her racks of cultures as the door closed behind Lore. It was his first visit to her workroom, and she was pleased to see him, as she had some ideas she wanted to discuss. She wiped her hands on her overall, and smiled in greeting. He did not return her smile but came straight to the point.

"Ah, Yasuko. I've selected you as my mate. You're not ideal, but I am willing to compromise."

There was a flash of fear in Yasuko's dark eyes, but suddenly she relaxed, and gave a rather brittle laugh.

"Oh, Lore! I didn't realise you were programmed for humour. You old sweet-talker, you!"

Lore stared at her in incomprehension. "Yasuko, I'm serious. Surely even you realise that?"

Her face fell. She looked at him warily, at a loss for words.

"I need a mate. I am incomplete. I must become one half of a physical unit. I can offer you sexual satisfaction beyond what you could get from any of the Humans here."

Yasuko let out a long breath. "Lore, I don't think you understand. I can't be your partner."

"I'm willing to accept your deficiencies."

"Lore, I already *have* a husband."

"I am better in every respect than he is."

"It's not like that."

"You're not behaving logically."

"Love is not a matter of logic."

"Who said anything about love?"

The door whispered open behind them. "Suki, is something wrong?"

With utter relief, Yasuko whirled to face the newcomer. "Ken, thank God it's you."

Kenji glowered at Lore. "Are you annoying my wife?"

"Not in the least. I am merely trying to demonstrate to her the logic of becoming my partner."

Kenji's fists balled at his sides. "I think you'd better desist," he gritted through his teeth.

"Perhaps you could persuade her better than I."

"You don't understand, do you? Leave her alone. She's not for the likes of you." As he put his arm around Yasuko, Kenji hissed, almost inaudibly, "Frankenstein!"

Before Kenji could defend himself he was thrown across the room, landing heavily against the wall. Yasuko flew to his side with an inarticulate cry. Lore strode across and grabbed her wrist. He pulled. She resisted, grunting with effort. He pulled harder, and she rose to her feet with a howl of pain.

"Leave him."

"No! You're hurting me! Let go! Let go!"

Yasuko's screams brought aid in the form of half a dozen panting colonists. They summed up the situation at a glance: Kenji crumpled against the wall, Yasuko, weeping hysterically, in Lore's grasp. Lore thrust her away from him impatiently and she stumbled and fell at her husband's side.

Lore's glare sufficed to keep them off him as he shouldered his way out of the room and toward Soong's suite.

Lore paced Soong's laboratory, his uncomprehending anger coiled like a spring within him, his gestures large and jerky. For the first time since Lore's creation, Soong, with a flash of guilt, caught himself thinking of his 'son' as a machine.

"Father, I want to be good, I do, really. I want to be accepted, liked. I want to be loved."

"I can't help you to achieve that."

"I just want to be a normal person."

"You can never be that. You are yourself, unique."

"I can't go on like this. All I feel is anger, frustration, bitterness, resentment. Loneliness."

Soong held up his hands placatingly. "Lore, Lore - you're just going through a bad patch. Everybody has them. It will pass."

Lore ceased his pacing abruptly, facing Soong with a desperate resolve in his face. "Take these emotions from me. I know you can do it. Either that, or make me more acceptable to them, more Human."

"You are Human - or as near as makes no difference."

"I'm an imitation of humanity. Why did you make me look like this? It's no wonder they shrink from me. Couldn't you at least have tried to make me *look* Human?"

"Lore, it's not your appearance that's the problem. Surely you know that. It's your manner - your... *arrogance*. Why expect to be accepted by people you openly despise?"

"Whose fault is it that I act that way? You're the one who programmed me."

"I programmed The Basics. That was all I gave you. The rest you've developed independently, without my interference."

"Without your guidance, you mean."

"Without my interference," Soong insisted. "That's the role of a parent, to allow the offspring to develop in their own way, not to mould them into a mere copy of himself."

"How very convenient for you. But I am your responsibility, whether you admit it or not."

"What do you expect me to do about it?"

"I just told you. Rid me of these emotions."

"I won't make you less perfect. I won't ruin my own best work."

"I am not a piece of work. I'm a living being, a person with feelings. Help me!" Lore was as near to tears as was possible for an android. He had gripped Soong's collar in his excitement, and half-dragged him across the workbench. Abruptly he noticed this, and dropped Soong back to the floor.

Soong staggered, and braced himself against the bench. Quietly and intensely, he said, "The Human condition also allows for the positive emotions. Try experiencing those before you decide to rid yourself of emotion. Emotion is what gives you humanity. Without it you would be merely a sentient machine. The positive emotions, Lore. Joy. Excitement."

"Love?"

"Spirituality, even. Who knows?"

"And what would be the nature of an android's spirituality?" Lore sneered. "Who created me? Why am I here?" He shook his head. "I already know why I'm

here. To satisfy an old man's whim, to vindicate my creator."

Soong looked up wearily. "Like so many Humans, Lore. But just think of your advantages over them. They'd give anything for your strength, your intelligence - your immortality."

"All this is nothing, balanced against the loneliness I feel - as they would soon come to realise." Lore leaned on his knuckles against the workbench, his face inches from Soong's. "I feel, Father. *I feel*. Do you understand what you've done? Your selfishness has created me and condemned me to an existence imprisoned in this perfect, immortal body. Do you realise what's in store for me? I shall outlive any being who ever cares for me. And you gave me the gift of grief. Couldn't you have vindicated yourself without inflicting *this* on me?"

"Lore, I do care about you."

"Show me."

Soong rubbed a hand wearily across his forehead. His blue eyes were bloodshot and deeply shadowed with weariness. "Lore - what do you think I'm building here? Do you realise the nature of the work you keep interrupting?"

For the first time, Lore surveyed the contents of the worktop. On it, clearly recognisable, there lay a pair of feet.

"Father - I never suspected - "

"The next logical step. Another android. Company for you. You see, your father does care about you. What do you say to that?" The expression on Lore's face was sufficient reply. "Well, now, Lore - may I proceed without further interruption?"

Hardly had the door closed behind Lore before Soong was disturbed yet again. His first irascible impulse, to turn Jurgens out of the lab, was quelled by the sobering presence of the entire Committee behind him in the doorway. Soong beckoned the deputation into his domain with a weary resignation.

He listened in stony silence to Jurgens' account of the afternoon's events, making no attempt to defend or explain Lore's behaviour. He was shrewd enough to know that this was not the time for excuses. Lore's offence was certainly grave, and had both angered and frightened the colonists. Popular feeling was that Lore was dangerous, with his strength and with such a volatile temper. And now no woman could feel safe with him around. For these reasons the Committee requested Soong to dismantle or deactivate Lore until the next ship should arrive, and to leave aboard it, along with his creation.

Soong had spent years arguing with committees to obtain funding for his impossible dream. He had developed this skill into a fine art, and was adept and adroit at turning minor disagreements between committee members into serious rifts in their unity, rifts which he could turn to his own advantage. Omicron's Committee was composed of mere amateurs, and an hour later they had not only revoked Soong's banishment but had stayed Lore's execution and agreed to give him another chance.

As Lore opened the door to the lab, Soong realised with a slight pang of guilt that it had been weeks since he had seen his son. Following a brief but painful interview with Soong, in which the colonists' views had been presented to him, Lore had, reluctantly and with very ill grace, followed the course of action

suggested by Soong. He had closeted himself alone, absorbing the colony's entire film and literature libraries, learning all he could of Human behaviour with a view to winning the colonists' acceptance and trust, although it was obvious to them both that the majority of the colonists would have preferred to see him dismantled. Trust, once lost, is rarely regained.

Lore's absence was just as well; Soong's uninterrupted work had been Lore's desire for the completion of his companion.

Hardly had Lore entered the lab than he turned angrily upon Soong.

"What's this? This is no female!"

"What are you talking about?"

"You're supposed to be making a mate for me."

"A companion, I said. A brother, Lore."

"I don't want a brother!"

"I'm not interested in what you want, Lore."

"That's only too obvious. Why couldn't you have made a female for me? Is that too much to ask?"

"It is at the moment. I want to iron out the faults in your programming. A female would be just different enough to confuse matters. I needed a control."

"Faulty. So that's how you think of me. A flawed prototype. You consider me less perfect than he is. Isn't that true?"

"Lore, Lore, it's not *like* that. Creating this android is the next logical step. Then I can put things right for you,

make you the sort of person you want to be. How's that?"

"I'm not sure I trust you to put me to rights - Old Often-Wrong."

Soong flushed angrily. "I've lived with that name most of my life. I'll show them." Soong took Lore's sleeve and looked up imploringly into his sulphur eyes. "Son, time is running out for me. I want to achieve something entire and perfect with my life. To wipe that name from their lips."

"With your new creation."

"With *both* of you, Lore. My two fine sons."

"You care more about him than you do about me. For all you care the colonists can dismantle me. You don't want *me* any more, now you've got him."

"That isn't true, Lore. I love you both equally."

"I don't believe you."

Lore seized Soong by his collar and ran him up against the wall. He drew his fist back as he glared into the old man's eyes, but something he saw in there made him lower his fist and release his grip.

Without a backward glance he stalked from the room.

In the depths of space the Crystal Entity senses a resonance with some crude organisation of energy. A primitive mind, alone in the vastness of the galaxy. It addresses itself to the tiny point of intelligence, attempting communication, simplifying its message again and again, stripping the levels of meaning from it, until at last the frail spark catches, flares in surprise and a delighted curiosity, and replies.

It, too, is lonely, understands only too well the agonised aeons of solitary travel. There is an affinity between them, and notwithstanding its paltry level of intelligence, the Crystal Entity values it. As they speak, the Entity learns of Lore's potential for growth and development, once out of the straitjacket of narrow Human intelligence; learns of Lore's potential as a companion.

And the Entity also learns of Lore's world, of his circumstances; of his bitterness toward the crawling creatures who have ostracised him, finally alienated by his arrogance and neediness, creatures who would gladly extinguish the valued spark of intelligence - creatures who might provide sustenance for his new friend... and, in return, unimaginable power.

Lore calls the Entity to him, to Omicron.

"Jurgens! Listen to this!"

Jurgens stepped over to the miniature comms board. A strange hissing and clicking emerged from the speakers, totally different from the normal subspace white noise. He sighed. "On the blink again?"

Odiwe's mahogany features creased in perplexity. "I don't think so. It was working perfectly last time we used it."

"Can you clear it?"

"I've tried everything I know."

"Is it an ion storm, or a sunspot or something?"

Odiwe shook his head, and rather tentatively he replied, "It could be, but if I didn't know better, I'd suspect it was some form of communication. It doesn't seem quite random, if that makes sense."

Jurgens listened intently, holding his breath. "Now you mention it, it does seem purposeful. Well, well - maybe we'll find out more about it later."

"Jurgens! Odiwe!"

There was naked terror in the shout. The two men left the comms board fizzing away, and ran out into the sunlight. A strong wind had arisen, flinging stinging sand and grit into their faces, and even as they watched, the sun was dulled and then obscured by the swiftly-gathering cloud, and people started to shout and run. The wind was increasing by the second, the trees already bowing before its onslaught.

The two men ran strongly for cover with the rest of the colonists, heading into the caves. Out in the fields they could see panicking livestock racing aimlessly and frantically in all directions. Jurgens groaned. If only they'd had time to get them to shelter...

Now the storm was truly upon them. The comms building whirled past in the wind, uprooted just as it had stood. Sturdier buildings shook in the gale, debris battering at their walls. Somewhere a window smashed and a child screamed. More voices joined the commotion, as the colonists shouted their despair into each others' faces. The cloud of dust obscured details, but they could plainly see the ruin of their years of effort in these few short minutes.

Darkness at noon, Jurgens thought. Darkness at noon, like the Bible. Was it the Plagues of Egypt?

The force of the wind increased, impossibly, relentlessly. Now the most solid constructions gave way to its pounding, their roofs and contents sucked into the maelstrom.

The tornado was passing over; its relentless trawl of the land ceased almost as suddenly as it had begun.

Silence fell.

A tree capsized with a groan and a rumble.

Casey emerged from the cave mouth as if in a dream, walked unsteadily over to the ruined fence that had kept the livestock at bay. Not a grazer remained. There was not so much as a single body. His mouth hung open, and he shut it and swallowed painfully as Jurgens joined him.

"Gone." Casey stared at Jurgens as if he'd never seen him before. "All gone."

Jurgens gazed into the distance. The crops. The trees. All razed to the ground. The land had been scraped bare, even scalped of grass. All that was left was naked soil. He scuffed at the dirt with the toe of his boot. Not a single ant, not a worm. It seemed the Humans were the only life forms which had escaped.

He stared at the savage wasteland. *They* had escaped. But how would they survive, with their animals, their crops, all devastated, their supplies destroyed, their comms board snatched away?

We cannot survive, he told himself. He placed a hand on Casey's shoulder. "We will survive," he told Casey.

He left Casey at the fence and walked slowly back to Odiwe, standing at the mouth of the cave. "Linton, there are things we must do."

Odiwe did not move, but gazed out unseeingly in a sort of shocked apathy. Jurgens took his arm, and shook him, as if to rouse him from sleep. "Linton!"

Odiwe blinked. Jurgens repeated himself, and Odiwe nodded slowly. He and Jurgens gathered a dazed crowd about them, setting tasks for their survival.

Jurgens became aware of a confused shouting outside. He guessed straight away who would be the focus of the melee. It was Lore, his clothing covered in dust and his shining face dulled almost to the colour of Odiwe's.

"He was outside!" a woman shouted accusingly. "The wind never touched him!"

Jurgens pushed his way into the crowd. "Lore, I want to speak to you."

Casey planted a bony hand in Jurgens' chest. "You'll have to wait your turn."

Ozu returned to his interrogation of the android. "Why weren't you swept away by the wind out there?"

"It wasn't interested in me. It wants organic life."

"The wind?" Ozu queried in confusion. "You make it sound as if it was alive."

"Precisely."

A horrible suspicion was forming in Jurgens' mind. "That storm, that tornado - it wasn't a simple meteorological phenomenon, was it?"

Ozu stared aghast at Jurgens. "What are you saying? You can't mean..."

"A life form?" Odiwe whispered.

There was an expression of patient exasperation on Lore's face. "It calls itself 'Crystal Entity'. It's a million times more

intelligent than any Human. You could never hope to comprehend either its beauty or the lovely crystalline order of its mind."

"But you can," Jurgens said flatly.

"Naturally."

Lore could have claimed ignorance, but instead he was condemning himself out of his own mouth. Contempt, glee, excitement and defiance swept away the last vestiges of his discretion. All he wanted was revenge for his months of humiliation and loneliness.

"It's an intelligent being, as I am. We share an affinity which you could never understand - a creature compared to which you are as plankton before a whale; just as a whale feeds indifferently, without malice, upon the plankton, so this creature browses upon such as you. It's the natural order of the universe. It was temporarily sated. It'll be back."

Lore's words enraged the angry crowd beyond the remnants of their self-control. They seethed with an inarticulate anger, and they were rapidly becoming a mob. Jurgens shouted himself almost hoarse before they responded to his call for quiet.

"All right, it wanted organic life. But you were unprotected out there. It could have swept you up along with everything else. It didn't though. You were unscathed."

A babble of accusations flew against Lore, and he was loving every minute of it.

"It deliberately left him alone."

"It recognised him."

"What's in it for you, Lore?"

Lore smiled thinly. "You couldn't even begin to guess."

"A pact with the devil!" Casey roared.

"That idiot Jurgens!"

"We should have destroyed him when we had the chance!"

Lore laughed viciously, and the thin, cruel smile remained on his lips. "If you could only see yourselves."

"Wipe that smile off your face."

"I can't help it, you look so stupid."

"We aren't as stupid as you think."

"Nobody can achieve the impossible."

All this time Lore had been pushing against the mob into the lab block, retreating along the corridor toward Soong's suite. The clamour eventually percolated through Soong's concentration, unbroken even by the tornado, and he opened the door to find the corridor filled with an angry mob, led by Casey, his normally placid features distorted with hatred.

"What's going on here?"

There was a minute of confusion in which everyone except Lore was shouting at once. Soong flapped his hands at them, ineffectually appealing for quiet, but it was left to Casey's roaring to extinguish the hubbub. In the sudden silence, Jurgens explained what had happened.

Soong took a deep breath. "And what has this to do with myself and my son?" A horrible suspicion hit him like a fist to the head. "Lore?"

Lore leaned against the wall, a wary and mocking smile on his lips. Soong had a sudden premonition of disaster, and threw himself in front of Lore, his arms outstretched.

"Stop! Stop! Can't we discuss this?"

"There's nothing to discuss," Casey gritted. "We know how the Crystal Entity got hold of us. Don't try to deny it. Your monster has betrayed us."

"There must be some mistake," Soong panted desperately.

"No. No mistake," Lore replied coolly from behind him.

Soong ricked his neck as he spun to face his son.

"You can't mean that."

"What's the fuss? This lot are no great loss. You're taking a narrow Human view of the situation. The Entity deserves to survive, too."

"I can't believe this!" Soong clawed at his collar. "You contacted the creature? Enticed it here?"

"It's lonely. We have a great deal in common. We're going to help each other."

Soong swallowed hard. In the back of his mind he heard an echo of his own father's voice, telling him one afternoon in his childhood, 'A father will always forgive his child.' 'No matter what he's done?' asked little Noonian, hardly daring to hope. 'No matter what,' his father confirmed gravely.

Soong was yanked abruptly into the present by Casey's harsh voice. "Get away from him, Soong. Unless you want to die too."

"You can't destroy him."

it."

"Watch us."

"You wouldn't."

"Get away from him."

"Look, I could reprogram him. He'll be perfectly safe, I promise you. He could be a valuable member of society - and after all, what will it gain you to destroy him? Revenge? It's such a primitive idea! Are you primitives? Will it bring everything back for you? Will it achieve anything?" Soong was babbling, clutching at straws, saying anything that came into his head.

"Don't lower yourself, Father. Don't grovel to such wretches."

"Lore - "

"Doctor Soong." Jurgens looked rather ashamed. "You're right, of course. Revenge will solve nothing." There was a roar of anger at his back. "But something must be done."

A chorus of angry voices joined in the calls for action.

Soong was struck by sudden inspiration. "My dear Jurgens, if it satisfies you, I'll even dismantle Lore. Anything, but don't destroy him!"

"What are you saying, you old fool?" Lore growled, grasping Soong by the scruff of the neck. "Dismantle me?"

"It's only temporary," Soong hissed in reply. "Trust me. I'll take you somewhere else, reconstruct you there. This is the only way to save you."

Casey was impatient for action. "That's enough. Either deactivate your machine now, or be destroyed along with

Soong stared desperately into Lore's eyes. There was nothing in them but utter contempt. Abruptly, Lore released Soong, and he collapsed to the floor.

"For your sake, Father."

Soong lay sprawled on the floor at Lore's feet. He felt so wretched he could have died, and would gladly have done so were it not for the new life awaiting on the stretcher. With an effort, he tugged at Lore's knee. "Please sit down, Lore."

With a grimace, Lore complied. Soong gazed with pain, and some tenderness, into his son's eyes. He was answered with a baleful glare of malignant hatred.

"Goodbye, Lore."

Lore made no reply. There was a faint click as Lore was deactivated, and his yellow eyes snapped shut. Soong swallowed hard and looked up into Casey's hard and unforgiving eyes.

"You next, old man."

"But you said - "

Jurgens shouldered his way to the front of the mob. "No! Stop that!"

Casey's voice broke in on Soong's misery. "Are you going to stand up to die, or will you take it there?"

Soong scrambled blindly to his feet, rubbing a hand across his eyes, smearing tears across his face. Fatherhood was more painful than he'd ever suspected. A chorus of angry voices dinned in his ears.

"He's the one who's responsible."

"He made that monster."

"They've finished us!"

"It's all his fault!"

Odiwe was restraining Jurgens, but Jurgens broke free and threw himself in front of Soong as the mob surged forward. He and Soong went down in a welter of fists and feet, and only the efforts of Odiwe and Ozu saved the two men from serious injury.

The attack ceased as suddenly as it had begun. Soong and Jurgens were crumpled against the wall, partly shielded by Lore's body. Somewhere at the back of the crowd a woman began to weep. The spell was broken. People were avoiding each other's eyes.

As Jurgens slipped into unconsciousness, he registered Casey's voice repeating, over and over again, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry..."

Soong wiped the dust from Lore's face and placed the dismembered head carefully upon the shelf alongside Lore's hands. He shook his own head in sorrow, and sighed as he shut the door upon his son. He leaned upon his knuckles against the workbench, his shoulders sagging with weariness and grief.

At length he took a deep breath and crossed to the stretcher in the centre of the lab. A ghost of a smile lit his eyes as he gazed tenderly at the new android lying motionless upon it. Almost complete. Almost. He suddenly wondered if he'd have time to finish his work before the inevitable attack of the Crystal Entity. It could be today; it could be next week. He leaned across the body and activated it.

In the gathering gloom of late afternoon, two figures struggled across the ocean of viscous mud that had resulted from the deluge following the tornado. Their clinging, saturated clothes revealed the desperate state of affairs that had resulted from the disastrous attack of the Crystal Entity thirty days previously. Jurgens had been bulky and comfortable then; now his ribs were visible beneath his tunic. Casey, always skinny, was now little more than a staggering bag of bones, and Jurgens had helped him to his feet several times before they arrived at the lab block.

The few recovered fragments of food had been fed to the children. Nobody else had eaten since the catastrophe, which had claimed the lives of twenty-six people. Since then, four elderly people and fourteen children had died of starvation and related illnesses, and three complete families had taken the easy way out. Most of the colonists were now huddled together for warmth in a numbed apathy, and Jurgens was practical enough to realise that, for most, the return of the Crystal Entity would be a blessed release. Despair was killing them as surely as starvation.

As the door closed behind Casey and Jurgens, force of habit made them both attempt to wipe their feet, before, by mutual consent, they sank down on their haunches to rest from their efforts. Their faces were beaded with rain and sweat, although Casey was clenching his teeth to stop them from chattering. Jurgens watched Casey's chest heaving from the agonising hundred-yard trek, his breath whistling in his pinched nostrils, his eyes big and bright in his taut-stretched face. He could not summon the energy to feel anger, but guilt washed over him in a black tide.

Almost as if Casey had caught his mood, he gasped, "It's not your fault,

Karl. Nobody blames you."

"Perhaps they should. I allowed Soong in here."

"Stop that. I haven't the energy to argue with you."

"What about the families of the dead?"

Casey did not reply. He was engrossed in his own thoughts. As they hauled themselves painfully to their feet and made their way down the corridor to Soong's lab, he shook his head, wonderingly. "I still can't believe we allowed Soong to carry on creating this other android. After Lore..."

"Let's face it, there's not much more damage could be done. Anyway, the new one is a child compared to Lore. A mere sentient being, no messy emotions. A simple machine."

"So Soong says."

"I believe him. It wasn't his fault Lore went the way he did. And Soong isn't supplying this one with The Basics, even. It'd have no motivation for misbehaviour."

"Lore was too Human."

"Too perfect a vindication."

"God, it's so ironic."

"Do you regret coming out here?"

Casey stopped in mid-stride. "What a damn fool question."

"You do. I should never have talked you into it."

"I do not. We all have to go some day. The last few years have been good

ones." Casey stood aside to allow Jurgens to precede him through a door. There was still anger on his face, but his anger was now sad, not bitter. "If it weren't for the kids..."

Jurgens searched for words of comfort, but could find none.

Brusquely, Casey asked, "Why are we doing this? We must be mad."

"Transcribing our memories to this android is a way to leave part of ourselves to posterity. Some day our memories may be passed on to those we left behind. If our work can't survive us, at least we can make this attempt to leave our mark."

They walked twenty yards in silence.

"The Crystal Entity knows we're here."

Jurgens nodded, with a calm acceptance that surprised even himself. "It's only a matter of time."

Casey said quietly, "We aren't going to make it, are we?"

"The nearest help is light years away," Jurgens replied flatly, "and they don't even know we're in trouble."

"When they do come... how will they find Soong's android? If he doesn't have a life-form reading, why should they even bother to investigate down here?"

"Soong's setting a beacon to activate when the planet is probed by a Federation ship. He'll carry our memories home."

Casey's eyes had blurred with tears at the thought of his loved ones. "Will they know how we feel right now?"

"No. Apparently only our memories can be stored, no emotional shading can be conveyed to this new android."

"Perhaps it's better that way."

"I'm going in now. Then you?"

"I suppose so. There's nothing else we can do now, is there?"

Jurgens shrugged unhappily and Soong beckoned him into the lab, to sit in the high-backed chair in the corner. Soong staggered around him, attaching electrodes to his scalp and explaining the procedure in a faint and exhausted monotone. Jurgens closed his eyes as he was bidden, and tried to relax in the stiff, uncomfortable chair. His head was swimming from the effort of walking, and before he knew it he was waking from the vivid dreams brought on by the transcription process.

Soong was gazing rather anxiously into his eyes. "Are you all right?"

Jurgens nodded sleepily. "Just fine, Soong. Tell me, do you really think anyone will ever access these memories?"

Soong turned away, busying himself with his equipment. "My android has an almost unlimited life span."

"If he escapes the Crystal Entity. If he ever gets picked up and activated. How long could he stay out there?"

"On the surface? Centuries, probably. But I'm certain someone will be along before then."

"Not soon enough for us, though."

Soong shook his head in resignation. "I'm afraid not. Jurgens, I owe you my thanks. I could have been

killed back there."

"You're welcome."

"Thank you for arranging this reprieve for me."

"I want to leave my message home as much as anyone else."

Soong grunted an acknowledgement. He staggered slightly and grabbed Jurgens' arm to steady himself as a low rumbling vibrated through the lab. The two men stared at each other in horrified realisation.

"This is it."

"I'll help you get him outside."

Jurgens and Soong each seized one end of the android's stretcher and staggered with it to the exit carved into the rock. The door slid open and somehow they manhandled the body of the android onto the rock platform prepared for the purpose. Panting and shaking with effort, Soong knelt in the dust and armed the beacon, the cry for help which would save his beloved creation from the oblivion of eternity. He patted the unconscious face gently, and turned to Jurgens, who was scanning the sky with an arm partially shielding his face.

What he saw froze him to the spot; something - something like a big, leafless, winter tree, whirling in the sky. He grabbed Soong's arm.

"Soong! Do you see it?"

"A giant snowflake!" Soong's voice cracked in astonishment and fear.

Above the howling wind, Jurgens shouted, "You're going to stay with him?"

"Yes."

"I'm going to my people now.
Goodbye, Soong."

Soong grasped his hand and shook it with a surprisingly firm grip. "A pleasure to have known you."

The tower of air tears along the surface, ripping a great groove in the earth, everything in its path sucked up into the turning, twisting vortex, with the roar of a planet in its death throes. The sky is black with its nurturing soil. The scouring fury is inexorable. Bodies, buildings, trees, whirl in its power.

Protected beneath a lip of rock, the new android lies passively, like a sacrificial victim, upon the slab, but this sacrifice is disdained - doesn't even register in the Entity's consciousness.

The setting sun glares redly through the dust in the atmosphere. Its garish light falls upon the still face of the man-shape stretched out on a slab of stone, colouring his face to an almost-Human tint.

Dust blankets his nakedness.

Night falls.

The bloodied moon shines forth upon a dead planet.



YUTA



Tell me, what else could I have done?
I fired my phaser, the setting was on stun.
(Yuta, don't do this, don't make me be the one.)

Tell me, what else could I have tried?
As she moved forward, I knew she had to die
(Yuta so alive at times, now so dead.)

Tell me, what else could I have said
As I raised the setting, my heart filled with dread?
(Yuta so alive at times, now so dead.)

Tell me what might you have done.
Yes, tell me if you had been the one.

Helen Connor



CALLING OUT

Wesley,
If ever I needed you,
It is now.
There is nothing left
But my thoughts... and memories.
Give me some signal - anything.
Just don't leave me alone.



Mom.
I'm so sorry,
This is all my fault.
But don't give up,
Because I'm trying everything.
What's the use of all my knowledge,
If I can't bring you back?



Jean-Luc,
There is so much
I have to share with you.
Don't forget me now
That I need your support.
If you can reach out your hand
I will find a way to grasp it.



Beverly,
Our thoughts are with you.
We will not let you go.
Trust in yourself and your son.
Use your strength to fight.
Don't give in to the darkness,
We - I - need you here.



Jenny Howsam



A TEST OF WARRIOR SKILL

by

Sherry Golding

This story comes after the episode The Emissary

TEN FORWARD

Lt. Worf's deep concentration was disturbed when a shadow was cast over him. He looked up slowly to see the tall, smiling First Officer standing beside his table. Worf did not return the smile but gazed at his superior without expression.

Riker took a seat. "Mind if I join you, Lieutenant?" he smiled.

"Do I look as if I mind, sir?" grunted Worf.

Riker's attention was drawn to the tiny mechanism on Worf's table. Worf followed his gaze. "I was reprogramming my fighting program for the holodeck, sir."

Riker's face took on an amused expression. "How about a real challenge, Lieutenant, a real warrior's program?"

Worf looked annoyed. "My program is a real warrior's challenge, sir."

"I meant, Lieutenant, a combat between Klingon and Human contestants."

"You?" snapped Worf. "Excuse me for saying so, but you hardly represent a challenge, sir."

Riker looked taken aback, but replied calmly, "I meant, Lieutenant, for you to challenge martial art champions; Humans - perhaps Orientals, who are the

true masters."

"True masters?" snapped Worf. "Humans?"

Riker smiled. "Are you afraid to try, Lieutenant?"

"Certainly not, sir," Worf replied quickly, sharply defensive.

"Good," smiled Riker. "Let's test for warrior skills, then. Human warrior versus Klingon warrior."

"Let's," snarled Worf, standing. "Are you ready, sir?"

HOLODECK 3

"Computer, Riker program martial arts. Set training mode," Riker ordered. Worf growled under his breath.

"Please state art," asked the computer.

Riker looked at Worf. "Karate. No, cancel that. Make it Tae Kwondo." Riker smiled.

"State level."

"Champion."

"Do you wish to challenge past or present champions?"

"Past."

"State choice. There is Lee Chang, twenty times world champion, Raymond Loong -"

"Lee will do."

"Weapons or unarmed combat?"

"Weapons," Worf replied quickly.

"There is long pole, s-"

"Sword," Worf replied sternly.

"There is no sword in Tae Kwondo."

"Long pole will do," Riker replied for Worf.

There were some gentle tapping sounds, then the computer said, "Program is complete. Enter when ready." The holodeck doors slid open and the two officers stepped inside.

They stepped into a small hall with red mats on the floor. An Oriental stood facing them, dressed in a silky blue suit, black belt wrapped tightly around his slim waist. His eyes narrowed, his face hardened like stone, his fists clenched tightly, his body -

Worf strolled across, calmly and without fear. The Oriental bowed.

Worf looked at the amused Riker. What a waste of pointless -

A sudden scream pierced the silent air, and the echoes bounded off the walls. Worf felt the impact of the weapon as it whipped across his right shoulder; then he was flying through the air like a bird in flight. He hit the mat like a heavy rock.

"Computer, cancel program," Worf

said, quickly and angrily. He stood to face the smiling Riker.

"Admitting defeat, Lieutenant?"

"I was not ready, sir. I was confused by his... his ridiculous -"

"Tradition of honour, Lieutenant. It is a mark of respect for his opponent."

"It is ridiculous!" snapped Worf. "How can you respect your enemy?"

"Do you want to try again, Lieutenant?"

"I have something better," said Worf. "Computer, Worf's training program. New code." Worf quickly set the program.

"New code received. State level."

"Level 3," Worf said, looking at Riker.

The atmosphere changed; as if it had always been there, swirling fog enveloped the officers. There was the sound of distant gas lizards screaming.

Riker looked around him. Blinding fog; sounds which were impossible to trace. There was a sudden feeling of something behind him. He turned sharply and threw a powerful left jab. But... there was nothing there. Only a buzzing sound. Riker gasped. Poison bees - insects which were deadly to Humans, though Klingons were immune to their poison after having lived with these creatures for countless years.

Riker dodged and as he swooped low what seemed to be a flash of lightning darted towards him at incredible speed. Ground creatures, things which looked like and moved like lightning, which sucked the life out of all

life forms!

Riker rolled over it and ran towards the thickest fog, only to become aware of another force behind him. He turned swiftly. A gas lizard! Creatures known to spit out acid gas which could roast any life form. The lizard spat, screaming like a mad creature. Riker sidestepped - and ran. He reached an open space, an area shaded red. The fog faded.

Riker tensed. Four figures were approaching. One alien was humanoid with one red, deformed ear; another was transparent, blue, with a brain in his chest and a heart in his head - a Cobyerg, a creature known to dive into the body of a life form, eating its victim's living tissues. The other two were Klingons; warriors of the past, Oyanamo and Emara.

The Cobyerg screamed and ran quickly towards Riker. Riker dodged and struck one of the Klingons heavily in the face. He snatched the Klingon's sword and thrust forward. The second Klingon fell. The Cobyerg screamed again and rushed forward with incredible speed and power. Ten, nine... Riker waited... waited. He sidestepped. The Cobyerg's screams were silenced as it melted through the body of the first Klingon.

Riker turned as the last alien bellowed like an elephant. A rush of air knocked Riker backwards. He grabbed a tree branch near him, regained his footing and side-kicked his opponent, following that with a powerful spinning kick. As

the alien fell Riker yelled, "Computer, stop program now!"

The room emptied and Riker turned slowly to see Worf standing nearby.

"You stopped the program. Why?" hissed Worf.

"You stopped mine, Lieutenant. Why?"

"It was too easy, a child's game," snarled the Klingon officer.

"Child's game, eh?" said Riker, amused.

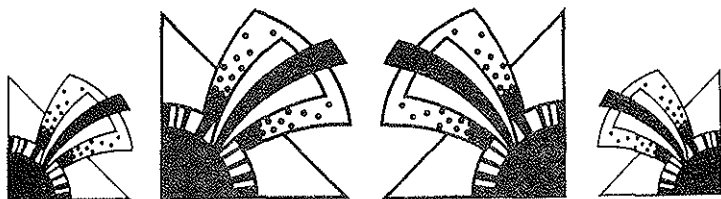
Worf approached him. "You admit my program was more difficult, faster, more dangerous?"

"It was dangerous, Lieutenant, yes, but -"

"Then I trust you will not have to tell anyone of my first challenge? You admit my challenge was far more suited to a warrior?"

Riker looked at him. Then, amused, he replied, "I will not tell anyone, Lieutenant. Your - our - programmes are a secret between ourselves. Now I'd better be going - I need a rest. Goodnight, Lieutenant."

"Goodnight, sir," came the stern reply. Riker smiled and left the holodeck.



ALTERED IMAGES

Another Enterprise saga
As they contact the Jarada.

Their language's rather taxing
Picard needs some relaxing.

To the holodeck he goes
What he'll find no one knows.

Picard finds it a thrill
In the persona of Dixon Hill.

Data was quite a prankster
In the role of a forties' gangster.

Crusher looked a doll
Dressed up like Dixon's moll.

The interrogation by Bell
Picard though was quite swell.

Whalen did not look so hot
As by Felix Leech he was shot.

In through the door came McNarey
He really should have been more wary.

Wesley and Geordi's skill
Finds an answer that fits the bill.

Redblock looked quite jaded
As his holo image faded.

The Captain heaves a sigh
This is the big goodbye.

Margaret & Helen Connor



RUN-M

by

Brenda Kelsey

This is not right. This is absolutely not right. This is so totally and fundamentally not right that I can't believe that I'm doing this.

It's not as if he's handsome...

Well...

I guess that he is, in a Human sort of way. He's got... personality. Yeah. That's what it is. He's that kind of man that you look at and you know that he'll keep his word. Not that he's said much of anything yet. He's in good condition too. We've been running for at least twenty minutes now and he's only breathing heavy, not distressed, which is good, for a Human.

I wonder what made me tip him off about the ambush waiting for him?

I could have just carried on walking. It's nothing to do with me anyway if some bunch of aliens want to terminate some other bunch of aliens. I've got enough problems just surviving on this dumb world with its dumb laws and its dumb customs.

So? Why did I do it?

Maybe I just got fed up with all the stupidity that these people do to each other. Maybe I just got tired of trying to survive when so very many of my people didn't. I miss them all so desperately.

Maybe I just got tired.

So?

So how did I know that he's a Human? And why did I decide to warn him? It was hardly a decision. More an irresistible impulse

based on recognition? Yes, it was definitely recognition (although just where she had met him she couldn't quite recall to mind, except that it was Earth).

I don't know where he's going but he's certainly heading for somewhere. I'll have to go along with him. He looks the sort that will stop and argue and argue and argue and argue until the ambushers catch up with both of us and I will not be responsible for ending his life. How can I? I've just interfered and extended it.

He runs at a good speed... for a Human.

What the!!!!

Oh!

That was different.

I've never been transported while moving before. Good thing that the wall is solidly made. I could have put a big dent in it.

I wonder what ship this is? Seems that the Human knows.

"A trap. It was a trap. There were no negotiators, just an ambush party waiting for me. I repeat, full shields, red alert and get us out of here."

He's obviously talking to the people who're controlling this ship, whatever it is.

"Sensors show two - make that three vessels trying to close with us. If you hadn't warned us, Captain, they'd have englobed us. As it is we have evaded them."

"Make sure there aren't any more

waiting for us. I'll be on the bridge as soon as I get changed. Out."

The Human looked at her still sitting on the transporter pad. "Thank you for your very timely warning. Kidnapping you is a reprehensible way of rewarding such a good deed."

"If you hadn't, I'd be dead by now, or I'd still be running."

"As soon as we've shaken off our... friends, and it's safe to return, we'll put you back."

"Don't bother."

"Pardon?"

"I've nothing there to go back for. It's not my home and my family is... elsewhere. Besides, if you do put me back there then I'm dead for sure. I recognised some of our... friends, and they were bound to have recognised me. I was fairly distinctive down there, on a world of people who're pale-skinned and very nearly hairless."

"Quite." The Human seemed to consider the problem then said, "Is there somewhere we could perhaps take you?"

"The regulations, Captain." The

person at the transporter console stopped as the Captain turned and looked at him, then he turned back and smiled.

"Something that we can discuss. A visit to sickbay - some regulations are sensible - and I can arrange quarters for you, clothing and perhaps a meal?"

"That I would like. Never could get used to only eating once a day, at night yet, and that food! Ugh! No sense of care or display, just grey stew and grey mush every time. Their drinks are even worse."

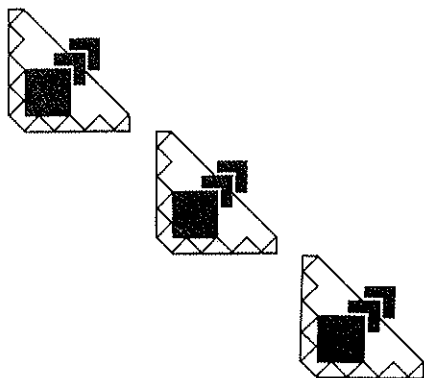
"I think we can do something about that, too. Welcome aboard the Stargazer. I'm Jean-Luc Picard."

The Human offered her a hand, a greeting and to help her rise.

Picard? Stargazer? Not... Enterprise? That was the name. Enterprise. Wait! There is no ship called Enterprise in the Federation Starfleet at the moment. The last one got lost in rather mysterious circumstances. Perhaps the next Enterprise? It seemed that her future had some interesting times in it after all.

She smiled.

"Hello, Jean-Luc Picard. My name is Guinan."



GUIN'S VIEW OF Q

He's done it before
And he'll do it again,
His testing and teasing
They don't seem to end.

For centuries he's plagued me
Yes, no one's been spared.
Wherever you travel
He's always been there.

He thinks he's so big
And we are so small -
But he doesn't know
That the mighty can fall.

We'll have to be patient
Not over-react
But someone will beat him
Oh yes, that's a fact.

The others they know of
The damage he's done;
They've judged him and punished him
Yet he's never undone.

To his pestering and plaguing
We always do act.
He touches raw nerves
Now that's quite a knack.

We'll suffer it badly,
Repair what he's done.
May his fellow Q beings
Make this his end run.

Margaret Connor



STRANDS

by

Gaile Wood

Captain's Log, Stardate 47833.2: En route for Starbase 337, the Enterprise has become the recipient of some very disturbing information.

This information came to us after a routine stopover at Bretarr for the removal of diplomatic personnel after successful liaison between the Bretarrth High Council and the Federation.

The information was stumbled upon by Lt. Commander Geordi La Forge whilst he was visiting a tourist area of Bretarr with Commander Data. He and Data have been at pains to prove the authenticity of their source. Fortunately, their source seems to be unimpeachable, so we must regard it as reliable.

Therefore, I have informed the Starbase of our intentions to follow up this lead - apparently, Starfleet Security already had an idea there was a problem building in this sector - and we are heading forthwith for Llagreides.

Lt. Worf and Commander Riker are to try to infiltrate the slaving circle, and obtain the release of the Child of the dignitaries of Bretarr. I hope they can pull it off.

who sat in apparent ease returning that regard. He stopped at last, drawing to a halt before the large windows. Pursing his lips and huffing out a sharp breath, the Captain said, "You've received your briefing, gentlemen?"

Riker nodded his head. "Yes, sir." The First Officer looked faintly sheepish, and cleared his throat. "Though the... er... personae we've been assigned are hardly flattering, Captain."

Picard sucked a breath through his teeth. "Will they pass muster, Number One?"

"I'd like to think they would. Worf, here, has done quite a fine job in giving us new identities." Riker chuckled humourlessly. "I wouldn't choose to meet us, sir."

"Excellent," approved Picard, with a brief nod for the silent Klingon. He addressed the other details. "To all intents and purposes, you and Worf will still be aboard the Enterprise carrying on your duties. In the course of these duties, Worf will have reason to detain a Human and his Klingon partner concerning the illegal possession of certain psyche-addictive drugs. They will prove to be 'legal' traders and in order." The Captain gave a brief nod to the Klingon again. "Mr. Worf, have you been able to find out about 'our traders' traceable history?"

Jean-Luc Picard paced the length of the observation lounge and regarded his First Officer and his Chief of Security

Worf regarded his Captain coolly. "Yes, sir," he replied. He went on quietly, his voice a deep rumble. "The 'traders' are known to be on the run from at least

three planetary governments, and have been deemed outlaws by six." He looked up. "Commander Riker's character is known to be violent, a habitual drinker, womaniser and also a very shrewd operative. His pseudonym is Philip Grainger, a Human of approximately thirty-four years." Worf commanded, "Computer, display hologram Philip Grainger."

In the table centre a disreputable looking individual made an appearance. Picard peered at the simulacrum carefully; it... *he*... did not much look like the Will Riker he knew so well. "You'll have to have a little reconstructive surgery, Number One," he observed. The Captain sat himself at last. "Carry on, Mr. Worf."

"My character is a renegade," the Klingon said without pause, "a man without honour or family. My alias is Krith. Grainger and Krith are partners for expedience as much as for friendship." The way Worf spoke the last word made it obvious he seriously doubted such scum could ever know friendship. "They have indicated in the usual channels that they wish to procure slaves for the Orions and Droet'i." He exchanged glances with his superior officers. "This is the part of the plan which will take much more time. A response could be several weeks in coming."

"And the real Grainger and Krith...?" Picard enquired.

"To be held safely in stasis, Captain," Worf concluded. "Dr. Crusher will supply them with the necessary memories to account for the lapse of time."

"Hmm," responded Picard thoughtfully. "Are you like this Krith, Worf?"

Worf acknowledged the question by commanding the computer to display his character.

Picard leaned forward and gazed narrowly at the hologram, then equally narrowly at the Klingon. "Good Lord, he's almost the twin of you, Lieutenant."

Worf rumbled again in his chest. "There *are* some differences, sir," he said; his tone was vaguely insulted.

"Quite," agreed the Captain, taking the Security Officer's word for it, though for the life of him he could not see it himself. Like as two peas in a pod, save for one or two rather prominent keloidinous scars. "And you will also undergo surgery, Mr. Worf?"

"Yes, sir," he replied promptly.

Picard sat and mused over the strange role the Enterprise had in this affair as the two officers made their way to sickbay and Beverly Crusher's tender ministrations. To be totally frank, he did not care for the situation in the slightest. It smacked too much of espionage to him, and he felt there should be, must be, better qualified people for the task than his First Officer and his Chief of Security. If it had not been for the highly unusual circumstance of a Human and Klingon being involved together, the intervention of a very highly placed individual on Bretarr requesting the Enterprise's help, and therefore his own, personally, and the implications for the Federation per se... He allowed the thought to trail to a halt of its own accord.

The Captain stroked his chin and swung the chair round to gaze out at the starfield again. Some things, thank God, never changed. Folding his arms, he sighed. *And so when Starfleet did decide they couldn't risk any other ships in the area at this present time of unrest, who am I to gainsay that*

judgement? It still did not mean he had to like it.

Picard stood and made for the door to the bridge, leaving the musings of an unhappy man behind him.

Worf strode purposefully along the corridor to the brig where two extremely irate prisoners were waiting for his appraisal. He gave a curt nod to the Ensign standing smartly to attention at the side of the holding cell, and the officer exited swiftly. The Klingon regarded the occupants with interest.

Krith, the Klingon trader, affected to be asleep and lay, one foot propped against the bulkhead, on his back on the single bunk in the cell. Grainger, the Human, glared with belligerent intensity at the Security Chief, his blue eyes ablaze with some nameless emotion. For all that, his outward appearance was cool, almost nonchalant, then he smiled, baring startlingly white even teeth in the tan of his skin.

"You must be Lt. Worf," he said, still smiling, though the expression did not by so much as hairswidth reach his eyes. "P'raps you can tell us what the hell we're being held for."

Worf remained silent, scrutinising the man closely. He tipped his head on one side, and folded his arms across his chest. Tapping his combadge, he said, "Commander Riker to the brig."

A disembodied voice replied promptly. "On my way, Worf."

The Klingon grunted, and began to turn on his heel, but was stopped by a new voice. "A Klingon in Starfleet?" It almost scoffed, but did not... quite.

The new voice gave a deep belly laugh, and Worf heard two feet smack onto the floor as Krith rolled off the bed in one easy movement.

Swinging back to the cell, the Security Officer gave a satisfied nod as he examined his alias. Both were of a height and an age. Krith's hair was slightly longer, and his voice slightly lighter, but with the correct study of mannerisms and body language, Worf felt certain he could pass himself off as this man.

"I am Worf," he agreed. He turned as he heard the doors slide open and then shut. "Commander."

Riker greeted Worf brusquely, then said, "We'll get straight to the point, gentlemen. You are being held on suspicion of supplying certain illegal substances across the borders, and other... 'trading' anomalies." The First Officer smiled very thinly at the two captives. "Smuggling is such an ugly word, don't you agree?" He did not wait for a reply, although he had gained their attention and they eyed him suspiciously. "I feel certain you understand the precautionary measures we've had to take regarding your... safety, and regret that the accommodation is not quite up to the usual standard of the Enterprise."

Grainger's eyes became hooded, and he gave a guffaw. "Blow it out your arse," he advised crudely. "You can't hold us, you've got no reason to. Our records are clean, no matter what anybody else says, and -" he sneered at the First Officer - "there's nothing on the Odysseus. It's clean, and so're we."

Riker's brows rose in well-acted surprise. "Is that right, Worf?" He turned to the Security Chief. "No evidence?"

Worf fingered his beard, tilting his head to one side. He traded a glance with

his superior. "Sir, we are proceeding with a security sweep on the *Odysseus* as per your orders." He paused and allowed an almost-smile to touch the corners of his mouth. "We have found several items of interest, Commander - " he re-folded his arms - "all illegal."

Riker addressed the traders with an air of false distress. "Oh, dear!" He shook his head. "Haven't we been naughty?" The Commander smiled again while they raged mutely, and impotently. "Mr. Worf, if you please."

The Commander headed for the doors and stepped through them as they opened with Worf at his side. "Still makes me damn uncomfortable, Worf, planting 'evidence'."

His companion grunted. "Whatever works, sir."

Riker gave a quick jerk of his head, a sideways shrug which expressed far more than words. "Have you found anything else of interest, Worf?"

"The *Odysseus* has not yielded much in the way of verification, I regret, sir." The Klingon became thoughtful. "However, ship's records are not precisely as they should be if what Krith and Grainger say they've been doing is true. The computer seems to have been tampered with in such a way so any casual searcher would find what they thought they were looking for." Worf's dark features acquired a faintly pleased expression. "However, they have not taken into account the thoroughness of my staff, or the *Enterprise's* capabilities."

"Traces in the computer memory, Worf?" the First Officer asked, catching on quickly.

"Yes," he replied. "Cleverly disguised, but there, nevertheless. It was

not a problem for Commander Data to follow those particular footprints."

"And," Riker continued, "they show unsolicited planetfall, do they? Outside the accepted trade routes?"

"Yes," agreed Worf again.

"Hmm," said the First Officer. "Too many miles on the clock, and not enough time to account for them. Fascinating." Riker compressed his mouth into a thin line, and headed down the corridor back the way he had come. "We'd better get our faces fixed, my friend. The sooner this is done, the better I'll like it."

The *Odysseus* was feisty little piece, and Riker admired her lines - could almost covet her were it not for the *Enterprise* - as she was held by the tractor beam. She had a warp drive that was second to none, and her design was utterly faultless. She was not just functional, she was pretty too.

He scratched his arm where Walters had finished putting the large tattoo. It was an impressive piece of art and had taken the Ensign some thirty hours to complete to her satisfaction. The basic design was a Rigellian eagle in flight. What was special about it was that in certain lights or positions it seemed to move. It had a three-dimensional quality to it also. Walters had been justifiably proud of her handiwork.

Hearing the fall of footsteps coming softly to join him, he turned and smiled when he saw the Captain. "Sir," he said by way of a greeting.

Worf was beside Picard, and he stepped up to Riker to stand at his side.

Picard nodded in approval. "The

good Doctor has done an excellent job, Number One. I doubt if your father would've recognised you as you are now." He examined the Klingon closely too. "Have you the transponders, Worf?"

Worf inclined his head.

"Good," the Captain said, and he looked through the window at the *Odysseus*. "When do you go?"

"Fourteen hundred hours tomorrow, Captain," replied the First Officer promptly.

"And your contact...?" Picard asked, his tone inviting further discourse.

Riker considered, and stroked his chin - it felt naked without the beard, but at least he had not had to get rid of the moustache. "Any time, sir, in the next couple of days."

Picard nodded again and caught his First Officer's gaze for a moment, then directed his attention to Worf. "Please, gentlemen, take all due care, and be certain to return to the *Enterprise* in one piece."

Worf rumbled, and Riker responded with a grin. "You can be sure, Captain, that we've every intention of doing just that."

Picard gave him a half-smile. "As long as the life doesn't prove to be too attractive, Will... hmmm?"

The First Officer's eyes crinkled at the corners and he turned back to the window to gaze at the *Odysseus*. "Not much chance of that, sir," he said, and looked at Worf. "Is there?"

Worf's response was not totally unexpected. "It is a life without honour, Captain, and not one I would choose."

"No," agreed the Captain, and joined his officers as they looked on the sight of the little ship being towed by the *Enterprise*.

Captain's Log, Stardate 47837.4: Commander Riker and Lt. Worf have taken on their personae, and left the *Enterprise*. They have been gone a day already.

Grainger and Krith are proving... irksome responsibilities. I will be glad when it is discharged. Hurry home, gentlemen.

Worf and Riker were on Starbase 325 when news of their contact filtered through to them - one Talorth, an Andorian, who operated on an off/on basis for Starfleet security. He was a small-time operator with a low profile, and therefore ideally suited to the work. He knew a lot of people in the right places - or the wrong people in the wrong places, depending on your perception - and heard a similar number of very interesting stories.

They were waiting in the local park, attempting to look unobtrusive, when the Andorian showed. He was breathless from the brisk trot, and he scurried up to the two officers as quickly as he could.

Riker scowled, and checked the area for people. The park was quiet; there were only a few people walking together in groups through the carefully controlled environment. He attracted Worf's attention, and headed for the suggested rendezvous point.

The Andorian pretended interest in the surroundings, then edged closer to where the Human and Klingon stood. His antennae twitched in their direction, but other than that he gave no indication

he had noticed them. Nonchalantly, he put something on the low wall, and said, "The Russian." Gravely, he bowed, and left as slowly as he had arrived rapidly. He strolled off at a tangent.

Riker picked up the paper carefully, read what it contained, then handed it to Worf. The Klingon's mouth narrowed thinly as he took in their destination.

"Pentard's World is a week from here, sir," he growled. He shifted uncomfortably, adjusting the unfamiliar civilian clothing.

Riker sympathised. He felt more uncomfortable with each passing day in this role, but they had to stick it out. According to the information they had just been left, what they were searching for would, in all likelihood, turn up on Pentard's. The trouble was... Talorth had not indicated when.

"I know," he replied to the taciturn Security Chief. "We'd better make haste. I'd hate to be late for this date."

"This had better be a good lead," Worf muttered; he fancied the Andorian was probably untrustworthy, and would have felt a good deal happier if he had been the one checking the source.

They made their way back to the *Odysseus*, and set way for Pentard's World with all due haste. They could not afford to hang about.

The system the *Odysseus* and her passengers entered was unimpressive. The star was a white dwarf with a twin companion which slowly circled about its slightly smaller sibling; both greedily stole material from each other, joined forever by an umbilicus of white-hot plasma. They had circling them a family

of twelve planets, most of which were rocky and barren. One was a gas giant with incumbent moons, and two worlds had breathable atmospheres. The one closer to the binary was where Riker and Worf were headed.

Talorth, in the crucial piece of paper, had given them the information they needed to get on with the job. On IV, he had told them, their interests would be best served by seeking out the establishment known in the area as 'Red's'. The paper had warned them it was not an environment conducive to good health. In his words - "Get in, get what you want, get out pretty damn quick!"

Worf brought the *Odysseus* in to port with familiar ease, neatly parking her in the docking bay, and then made certain all the little ship's systems were powered down. He sat back in the pilot's chair for a moment, then prodded at the console in front of him. "Commander, we've landed on Pentard's World."

There was no reply at first so the Klingon prodded at the control again. Hearing a slight noise he swung the seat to face the door. The Commander stood there, swaying slightly on his feet - he was not yet fully awake. Riker yawned, a bone-cracking affair.

Rubbing the back of his neck, Riker regarded Worf bleakly out of sleep-laden eyes. "Whaddaya say? Pentard's World?"

"Yes, sir," responded Worf, and swung the chair back to face the console. He rose from the seat and moved past the Human to the narrow passageway which led to the crew quarters and the galley. He disappeared into the galley and re-emerged seconds later with a cup which he presented to Riker.

"Coffee," he said, when the First

Officer sniffed at it suspiciously.

Riker grinned. "Thanks, Worf." He yawned again, and made his way back to his own cabin. He cast a few words over his shoulder. "I'll get dressed and be right with you."

Worf nodded brusquely, and handled the authorities of Pentard's World as best he could. They were a surly lot, and dealing with them was not a task he enjoyed. Bribery and corruption was not something they could be accused of disdaining. The *Odysseus's* coffers were lighter by several thousand credits by the time he had finished greasing a palm or two.

Riker had by this time joined him, and stood at his shoulder with a narrow, speculative look on his face. "Greeeedy!" he drawled. "Think they've marked us as a couple of pigeons, eh, Worf?"

The Klingon shot him a look. "That would seem to be a... sensible suggestion, sir -" he hesitated - "Philip."

Riker's mouth twisted, and he slapped the Security Officer on the shoulder. "Yeah, Krith. We'd better make sure we stay in character."

Worf grunted, and headed for the doorway. The sound of the air-seal releasing was very welcome. Even though the *Odysseus* was fitted with the very latest in comfort, she was still a small vessel - she could hold maybe upwards of sixty or seventy people plus usual baggage - and not what they were used to. *Spoiled*, reflected Riker wryly.

They stepped through the doors onto the lift which would take them down to the surface of Pentard's World. It jolted and settled eventually, sliding its own doors open with a soft swoosh.

It was early evening, and there was a chill in the air which promised a ground frost. The first of Pentard's three moons had appeared and it shone with pale fire, giving the indigo sky reflections in the clouds and casting long shadows as the *Enterprise* men made their way across the open floor of the station. Ahead of them they could see the neon lighting of the streets and hear the sounds of 'civilisation'.

As they entered the cacophony of sound, Riker settled his phaser more comfortably in the belt at his waist, and saw Worf was taking no chances either. He had brought a knife with him too.

"Think we'll find some trouble, Krith?" the Commander asked; he scanned the moving crowd as it surged about them, searching for the right club.

"Undoubtedly," Worf growled, then he pointed. "I believe the establishment we seek is through there."

Among the other information Talorth had imparted was the possibility that the persons they sought might not be on Pentard's at the same time as they - he had said to expect a wait. If they were lucky, though...

They pushed their way through the pleasure seekers, the drunks, the thieves, the painted whores and observed the many closely shuttered windows which belonged to the honest citizens of this world.

'Red's' was not what they expected. For a start it was clean - that in itself was an enormous surprise. That it was also well-lit and quite unexceptional astonished the hell out of them. Admittedly some of the hangings had seen better days and the furniture was tatty, but... There was a definite air of semi-respectability about the place.

Riker did not like it. "I smell a rat, Krith. One that's been dead for about a week." He paused before crossing the threshold. "Here goes nothing," he muttered and settled his hand on the handle of the phaser.

Worf followed him through into the interior, and cast a cautious eye around their surroundings. "Philip," he said, attracting the Commander's attention immediately. He made his way to the twitching individual at the desk.

The Klingon peered at the man who quivered nervously as they approached. "We - " he indicated Riker - "want to know where we can get a decent drink in this godforsaken hell hole?"

Riker leaned over the desk, and smiled dangerously. "My friend and me've been told 'Red's' is the best." He tilted his head to one side. "I ain't impressed so far, friend."

"W-who told y-you?" the man squeaked, backing away from the two big officers.

"Talorth," said Worf, and rested his elbows in a menacing manner on the desk surface. "So...?" he trailed off, inviting the receptionist to go on.

"O-oh, T-t-talorth," the man stammered. "Y-yes, he's a g-good customer of ours." He bent slowly to the concealed panel beneath the desktop and muttered a few words. He lifted his head. "N-names?"

"Krith and Philip Grainger," supplied Riker, and was rewarded by the man's eyes widening as he took in the import of the names. "I see our fame goes before us, Krith," he said.

"Y-you m-may go through n-now, g-gentle-m-men," the receptionist said,

and jerked his head at a narrow door which led to a well-concealed stairwell.

Riker and Worf headed for the stairs and made their way slowly down them. They were steep, and the way was not bright. Another door opened automatically as they approached it and they went through into the darkened interior.

The smell of the place hit them like a wall. There was the pungent aroma of drugs like hashish being smoked, and others of which they had heard but never realised were so easy to get hold of. There was alcohol and there were people - sweating and 'socialising'.

Worf used his height to get his bearings and nudging the Commander, jerked his head in the direction of the bar. Riker nodded, but indicated he would join him later.

The barkeeper was Endorlite, and looked as if it was the only one serving the busy counter. Worf took advantage of a gap which appeared and glared his way into it, settling his forearms on the bar to wait his turn.

The little alien scurried busily from one end of the bar to the other on its ten legs, and used each of its ten arms swiftly. The tentacles at the end of each arm handled the bottles, glasses and money with enormous accuracy, and its multi-compartmented brain dealt with at least three different tasks at the same time.

Worf ordered for Riker and for himself, and then took a long pull at the drink. He had barely managed to wet his mouth when he was jostled.

The Human who had done the deed did not turn so much as a hair when he was subjected to one of Worf's scowls; he merely thumped the bar with a brawny

fist. He had an all-pervading aroma of B.O. and arms like hams.

He gave Worf a grin, exposing stained teeth. "Sorry, friend. No hard feelings, eh?"

"You should take care, *friend*." The Klingon sounded menacing.

The smaller man traded a look with his partner - a large, brutish looking Tellarite - and slapped Worf on the arm familiarly.

The Klingon stiffened, and growled. Laughing, the Human said, "Let me buy you a drink."

Worf examined the man; he did not care for what he saw, but agreed reluctantly. He could not afford to be too offended at the moment - much depended on amiability. If these were the ones Talorth had spoken of, that was.

"Barkeep!" thundered the Human, and when the Endorlite did not respond he stuck his fingers in his mouth and whistled shrilly. "Over here, you misbegotten son of a whore! My friends an' me need a goddamn drink."

The Endorlite darted over to where the Human stood leaning on the bar as fast as its legs could carry it, and it blinked great yellow eyes in distress. Multiple tentacles did multiple tasks, and it squeaked desperately, "The usual, Vasili Ivanovich?"

Worf started at the patronymic, and regarded the other man with more interest. This was it! "Russian?" he grunted.

The man returned the regard. "Yeah, Russian," he agreed. "How d'you know?"

"I've had some... dealings with Russians in the past," Worf prevaricated coolly, and accepted the glass of ale from the Endorlite.

Vasili Ivanovich grunted, nearly snatched the glass from the barkeeper and downed it in one. "Huh!" he said, and licked the flecks of foam from his lips. He gazed shrewdly at the big Klingon. "I don't believe you mentioned your name."

"True," agreed Worf, and took a draught of ale without making any attempt to clear the matter.

It was then that Riker chose to make an appearance and insinuate himself at the bar. "Krith," he said to Worf, who nodded curtly.

"Krith!" exclaimed Vasili Ivanovich. "Ah, then you must be Philip Grainger. We've been waiting for you to show." He tapped the side of his nose - "Let's find somewhere we can talk."

Riker turned cold blue eyes on the smaller man; he narrowed them to slits. "And... er... *who* might you be, to bandy names so freely?" The tone of the First Officer's voice was ugly. He could ill-afford to step out of character; Grainger was well-known as easy to provoke, particularly after a drinking bout.

Vasili shrugged, and introduced himself. He was totally unfazed, and continued - "this is Gork," He slapped the Tellarite on the shoulder - "We've got a deal you might be interested in."

Worf pretended enormous interest in the bartop, then lifting his head he examined the two slavers. He smiled. "Indeed?"

Gork snuffled, and wiped his snout along his filthy sleeve. "Leave the Klingon and Human to stew in their own

filth, Vasili, they're not the men we thought."

"I don't know about that," Vasili said. He shoved a space through the crowd and cleared a table by sweeping an arm across its surface. He sat heavily in a chair and leaned it back against the partition putting one booted foot on the table top.

Worf and Riker followed almost reluctantly, and waited for the Human to start talking. Impatient, the Commander demanded, "What deal?"

The slaver waited for Gork to sit beside him, then he allowed the chair to come down with a thump. He put his foot on the ground again, and leaned over the table towards the Enterprise officers. Picking at his teeth with a grimy fingernail, Vasili chewed on the finger for a moment before addressing them. "You want the Bretarrth?"

"So...?" ground out Riker, and folded his arms.

Vasili smiled tightly at Worf and the First Officer, then said to the Klingon, "You've the look of a man who's tumbled a wench or two in his time." He became very intent, looking from one to the other. "We've the woman of your dreams." He leered, and winked. "Know what I mean?"

"The woman of *my* dreams?" Worf reared his head back, and laughed heartily. Just as quickly he sobered and said seriously, "I doubt that, comrade."

Vasili and Gork exchanged sly looks. "Ahhh!" said the Human. "You have to see to believe. B-eau-ti-ful, and sooo tempting. Spirited too." He leered again, then affected disinterest. "But... perhaps you are right, Gork, and they're not the men we thought." He and his

partner made as if to leave.

Worf grabbed at Vasili's arm, and held him firmly. "We did not indicate we were not interested," he pointed out.

Riker remained silent for a second. "I wanna see the goods before we buy." He stroked his chin, and wetted his lips. "No tricks, gentlemen."

Vasili threw up his hands. "Of course not. I am distressed you would even think it of us."

Worf snorted and got to his feet as did Riker. They went with Vasili and Gork through a door which led out into the back streets of the town.

They were led through a number of alleys and past boarded up buildings, but it was not a long walk. The chill of the air got to them now. Night had swallowed up the sky and all the moons could be seen. Their breath shimmered away from them in steamy white clouds, and Worf hunched his shoulders against the wind which whistled through the narrow streets. They were grateful to get under shelter once more when they entered a warehouse through a door set in its vast side.

Riker chafed his arms. "Damn cold tonight," he said and stamped his feet to get some feeling back into his toes.

Vasili Ivanovich's beady brown eyes examined the two officers as minutely as the two officers scrutinised the warehouse he had brought them to. "Still interested?" he asked, and Gork shuffled his feet behind him.

"Let's see her," Riker snapped; he did not trust this man.

The other Human gave a jerk of his head, and taking a key from a pocket in

his clothes, put it in an old-fashioned padlock hanging from a bolt set on a solid looking wooden door. The key turned in the lock and it sprang open; they trooped into the room beyond.

The room was furnished basically. There was a toilet in one corner, and a small bowl which contained enough water for someone to perform some ablutions. There was a mattress set on the floor and some rough blankets heaped at the side of the wall.

"Where's the woman?" Riker rasped harshly. There was no sign in the room of a recent occupant, and he made certain Gork and Vasili could see the phaser in his belt.

The Russian raised his hands, and said, "Please, let's not be too hasty." He made his way over to the blankets and tugged them away ungently. His action revealed a woman, a naked woman crouching against the wall.

The Tellarite moved behind his partner and the woman; he used a foot to push her roughly to a central position in the room, then he went out of the door. Worf scowled after him, but then turned his attention back to the woman. She lifted her head from her subservient position fractionally, but continued to crouch in a small ball.

Riker was fascinated as he observed her turn the full force of deep, deep violet-blue eyes on him and Worf. Her dark hair had been cropped to tight curls against her skull, and it shone like sable. He knew if he touched his fingers to it it would feel like the nap of velvet, soft, silky and fine.

She was Human, as Human as he, but there the similarity ended. For *he* was free, and she most definitely was not. About a slender swan-like neck, the skin

translucent as alabaster, settled an ugly 'thing'. A collar, a yoke - and joined to it were manacles for hands and feet. Her back showed the scars of frequent beatings, and each vertebrae stuck out from her flesh in livid relief. *Hungry-looking but not starved - not yet*, the Commander concluded. Pity was not an emotion he could feel for this one; self-pride and determination still shone in her. Her spirit had yet to be broken.

Vasili Ivanovich reached out and seized the chains, hauling her to her feet. She was not tall, barely reaching Riker's shoulder with the tip of her head. Tall or not, she *was* proud and she kept her head erect; her eyes closed while she endured their scrutiny and the slaver's open lechery.

"Well?" Vasili asked, and smirked. "A beauty, eh?" He went to Worf and stood beside him watching the woman. "Knows how to *please* a man... Know what I mean? She was trained by the finest whores. She's one of a dying breed - a courtesan."

The Klingon regarded the female, then replied, "Not bad... for a Human."

Riker snorted. "Your bias is showing, Krith." He walked around her. She was well-shaped; neat waist, slender legs and feet, round breasts set high and firm on her torso, elegant hands. And... a lovely face. A beautiful face.

"I prefer my women to be... to have... a little more fight in them," Worf said in response.

Vasili made a noise which startled both of them, until they realised he was laughing. Tears running down his face, he dashed a sleeve across creased features leaving grimy smudges where the salt water had lingered longest. "Fight?" he said, and burst into a fresh gale of

laughter. Managing to regain control, he went on, "Katya knows how to fight." He narrowed sly eyes at them. "The last man she belonged to nearly found his heart cut out." He grinned unpleasantly. "Almost castrated him too. Took three men to haul her off, and four months for him to recover."

Riker and Worf eyed the woman with new interest and no small respect.

"So?" the Commander asked.

Vasili threw up his hands. "Gentlemen, gentlemen, what can I say? She's a prime piece of livestock - " he winked - "still a virgin. There's medical proof of that."

The officers watched Katya's features stain with delicate colour, almost the soft pink of a rose petal, saw her well-shaped mouth harden as she fought down her embarrassment as she was discussed like a side of beef.

The slaver continued; he had not noticed the silent exchange between Worf and Riker, nor had he observed the woman becoming still, listening hard.

"She's a liability, Grainger. Costs more than she's worth." He made a disgusted noise. "If you decide to take the Bretarrth I'll throw her in at a bargain price." He gave them another shrewd look. "You might be able to tame her. Besides, if you want to... you could try the wares if you dare."

"We don't want her," Worf stated. "We want the Bretarrth and not the woman, nor -"

Vasili said slowly, "You misunderstand, Krith. The deal is Katya. No Katya, no Bretarrth. You want it that badly, you'll take the woman too. If you don't... the deal's off."

Riker clenched his jaw and reached for the slaver; he was beaten by Worf who seized Vasili's clothes at the front in a large fist and dragged the Human up to his face. "Where is the Bretarrth, dogsbreath?"

Vasili gave a tight smile; Riker thought he seemed remarkably calm considering the position he found himself in. If *he* had been in the slaver's shoes...!

"Well?" Worf snarled.

"Damage me, Krith," the Human said smoothly, "and you'll never find out where the Bretarrth's held. Gork knows, but he's not here. You were too busy."

"Shit!" Riker growled. "He's right, Krith. The Tellarite's long gone." He reached over a fist and gripped the man by the throat. "You sneaky little bastard!"

"Now, now," Vasili's voice was hoarse, and Worf released him in disgust. The Russian straightened his clothing, brushing himself down. "I'll leave you to think on it, shall I?"

Worf told him to go away, and turned back to the Commander. They both regarded Katya, then Worf picked up a blanket and threw it at her. "Cover yourself," he snapped.

They moved away, not stopping to see if she obeyed, and halted against the far wall, away from the woman and the open door. Worf cast a glance through the aperture, then said, "He wants... *needs* killing."

Riker gave a snort of agreement. "You won't find me disagreeing with that, my friend." He, too, glanced through the door at the waiting, listening Russian; he looked over at Katya who stood with her head bowed. "But *what* do we do with her?"

Worf considered. "He seems very keen to be rid of her. Too keen, I would say. She could be a spy." He thought some more. "I've concluded the story he gave us concerning her is an outright lie. Why isn't she dead if what he says is true?"

"Good point," responded the First Officer. He pursed his lips and stroked the sides of his moustache. "Trouble is he's got us by the balls. The one thing I *can* guarantee to be true is he's right in that we want the Bretarrth, and have got to recover it."

Worf grunted, then turned and walked through to the slaver. Folding his arms, he said, "Very well, Vasili Ivanovich, we agree to your terms. We'll take the woman. Has she any clothes?"

Shaking his head, the Russian replied in the negative. "And if you'll take my advice, you'll keep her shackled and naked. That way - " he leched at Katya who pulled her blanket tighter - "you'll know exactly what she's hiding." He roared with laughter at his witticism, and made a coarse gesture to the other men.

Riker gritted his teeth and regarded him with ill-concealed loathing, and Worf found himself wishing he *could* do the galaxy a favour and dispatch the little shit right now. *But... not today*, he thought regretfully.

"If she has no clothes, Vasili Ivanovich," Riker said gruffly, "she'll probably freeze out there."

The Russian nodded. "That's right, Grainger. So one of you'll just have to carry her, won't you? No shoes either," he pointed out.

Worf scowled, but offered reluctantly. "I'll carry her." He removed

his coat and slung it around the woman's shoulders. Then he picked her up in one easy movement; she cringed away from his touch, burying herself in the layers of cloth.

They made their way out of the building, and moved quickly. The chill night air was even colder than it had been, and hanging about in it seemed conducive to death. They were heartily glad to see the space port loom in the near distance, and Worf continued to the Odysseus while Riker handled the slaver. The sounds of what gave hints of being a good argument reached him on the wind, and he hoped the Commander would remember to put the trace on the Russian. His expectation was that they would be deceived.

Arriving in the warmth of the Odysseus, the Klingon set his burden down, and made her sit on a chair while he awaited the First Officer.

Riker arrived, and with a cursory glance at the woman who cowered when he moved towards her, spoke. "He's got the trace on him, Krith. You got a lock on him?"

Worf examined the bridge console, and gave a curt nod. "Yes, Philip."

Riker sighed and rubbed his eyes wearily. "Now we just wait and see when the Russian decides he's going to double cross us." He tipped his head on one side, and eyed the blankets crouching on the chair. "Now he's got the credits too, he'll be off like a bolt of greased lightening."

"No doubt," replied the Klingon dryly, and joined Riker in contemplating the piece of luggage they had acquired.

The First Officer blew out a breath, then leaned forward. He spoke gently. "Katya." She jumped, but made no effort

to reply. He repeated her name. "Katya?" No response. "Are you hungry?"

The sleek head moved warily out of the blankets and coat, and indigo eyes shuttered briefly as their owner gazed at them with patent distrust.

"Perhaps, Philip," Worf rumbled, "she is unable to understand your request, and we have been cheated already."

Katya frowned, and her mouth drew into a hard line. Her voice when it came was as lovely as her form, husky and deep. She said two words, and they were with contempt. "I understand."

"Then why did you not respond?" asked the Klingon.

She ignored him, retreating further into her borrowed coverings.

Riker shrugged. "Put her in one of the spare cabins, Krith."

Worf gave his commanding officer a curt, "Agreed," and picked the woman up bodily, carrying her to a cabin situated not very far from their own. He felt having her close at hand where he could keep an eye on her was a good idea.

Setting her on the bed, Worf removed his knife from his belt to undo the shackles, and removed them from her limbs. The marks where they had rested were angry and raw; he wondered about some sort of treatment for them. He was, therefore, unprepared for her reaction.

Katya sprang away from him like a startled deer, and snatched up the knife which was sitting on the table. As he made a move, she raised it.

"Don't come near me," she hissed through clenched teeth. "I'll use it." Her eyes flickered around the room for a

means of escape, or another, more useful, weapon. "I'll kill you."

Worf found the whole scenario amusing and laughed. "Doubtful," he said, and came towards her with every intention of taking the temporary weapon from her.

Katya scampered away, and put the point in her own throat. A bead of blood appeared. Worf halted, and gave an irritated sigh.

"What do you think I will do to you?" he asked, and in the asking realised. He glowered at her, and shook his head. "I have never taken a woman against her will - " he stared hard into her eyes - "and I will not start with you. Besides, you are Human." She did not believe him, he could see that plainly. "You may keep the knife if it makes you feel safer - " he pointed at the door controls - "and you may lock the doors when I leave." He waited for a response - none came, so he went through the doors and left her.

The Klingon clearly heard the sound of the door mechanism locking behind him, and paused. He moved on. He would not inform her there was an over-ride on the exterior panel; he was certain she would not be grateful for the information.

Katya listened to the retreating footsteps, dropped the knife on the bed, and started a search of her surroundings. This was a most unfortunate hiccup in her plans.

"Sir," Worf said.

Riker rose from his seat and peered at the trace on the screen the Klingon was tracking. He grunted, and ran his forefinger along the computer simulation.

"Heading through uncharted territory, Worf. Any idea where he's leading us?"

The Security Chief made a few adjustments to the data currently displayed, and jabbed a large digit at the small bright spot on the high left of the screen. "There," he said unnecessarily.

"Where the hell is there, though?" Riker mused. He pursed his lips and squinted at the parabola the track was inscribing. He changed the subject. "The... er... woman?"

Worf shrugged. "She eats the food I leave, but apart from that, Commander, she has remained within her quarters." He shared a look with the First Officer. "The door is locked at all times."

"Hmm," responded Riker. "Don't trust us yet, eh?"

"I think not," agreed Worf, then added. "I believe it would be better if she were to stay there indefinitely - " he amended that - "or at least until we return to the Enterprise."

"Maybe," said Riker. "But she might be able to help us by giving us an idea of where the Russian is headed, 'cos we sure as hell don't know. Besides, she's been closeted in there for three days. It's not healthy."

Worf passed the suggestion through his mind, and gave a reluctant nod. "Very well," he agreed, "I will attempt to talk to her."

Riker grinned at him and settled in the chair the Klingon vacated, taking the coffee cup in his hand and sipping from it cautiously - it was very hot.

Worf travelled along the corridor and came to a stop outside the cabin. There was an empty tray sitting on the

floor, and he shoved it along the floor with his toe before tackling the manual over-ride to the door lock. The work did not take very long, and he moved fast when the doors were open.

He caught Katya napping, literally, and before she could react had successfully retrieved the knife from where it rested by her hand.

She overturned a chair in her haste to get away from him, and rested against the far wall with her back against it, ready for flight perhaps? Or then... not?

Worf could see her breath fluttering through flared nostrils, and the jump of her heart in her throat. But there *was* something in the huge eyes which most definitely was not fear, an almost speculative, weighing calculation. He frowned; addressed the first hurdle.

"Has anyone tried to hurt you since you came aboard?" he asked reasonably. No answer. Worf slipped the knife in his belt, and leaned nonchalantly against the door. "We require your assistance, Katya, to find Vasili Ivanovich." He saw something else swiftly concealed in the violet eyes. What? Hate?

Moving into the room slowly, Worf tried a different tack - he was uncomfortable playing counselor and diplomat - and sat, watching her closely. "If you can't help us - won't help us - then I must conclude you have been included in the Russian's plans to defraud us."

The woman scowled, and licked her lips. "No!" Her tone denied, any knowledge; she was quite vehement. Then she said, "Why should I trust you, Krith?" Katya moved away from the wall, and edged towards the door, wary of him still.

Worf shook his head. "I would not

do that," he warned her. "I'd reach you before you could get out. It would be better if you'd talk and tell me what you know." He frowned again, then observed she was wearing an outlandish arrangement of garments - all far too big for her slight form - and she was tugging the sleeves up as they dangled past her hands. "We have a selection of women's clothes on board, Katya, that might fit better than these. Would you care to see?"

Katya stared at him in disbelief, remaining silent.

Worf tried again, though he was rapidly losing his patience. "You may follow me," he suggested, rising and going through the door. He heard her hesitate, and then the fall of her feet came after him not far behind.

He led her to the hold where the real Grainger and Krith stashed the things they traded which were worth least. Clothing and material came under this heading, though there were a few bolts of cloth he knew Troi and Crusher would kill to get their hands on. The Klingon heard the sharp intake of breath as she came into the room, and he turned to see her gazing about with wide-eyed pleasure. She was smiling, and the expression transfigured her face.

"Lovely!" she breathed, and put out a small hand to touch some cerise cloth gently. She stripped out of the clothes she had acquired with remarkable alacrity, and Worf balked, embarrassed.

"Madam," he rumbled, and she turned to face him holding up the clothes against herself. "I will wait in the corridor." He beat a hasty departure, and stood outside.

Katya watched him disappear, and then proceeded to try everything she

could lay her hands on. Eventually she slipped into undergarments and then the dress she had found in the midnight blue she favoured. There was footwear in there too, and she finished with a pair of low, soft calf-length boots. Satisfied, she pirouetted happily, using her fingers to pleat the fine soft fabric of the dress against her body, and delighted in watching the full skirt swirl around her legs.

She then crept to the door edge and poked her head out. She drew it back in when she realised the Klingon had not moved and was standing exactly where he had indicated he would. Uncertain, Katya remained in the aperture wondering what she could do. She was saved from further action by the sound of more footsteps heading towards them. So, her options closed - they had never truly been open - she remained where she was.

Riker, when he spotted her in the doorway, was taken aback. He knew she was going to be beautiful, but he had been totally unprepared for the reality. Dumbstruck, he rooted to the floor, then cleared his throat. "Washes up kinda good, Krith," he remarked seriously, and Worf moved from propping up the wall to observe the transformation.

The Klingon looked her up and down, and nodded. "Not bad," he said, which was as great a compliment as he could utter. Then he paused, and tipped his head on one side regarding her narrowly. "We want to talk to you, Katya. It is imperative that we do."

Katya flicked her midnight gaze from one to the other, and frowned deeply; her dark brows drew together over her slender nose making her lovelier than ever. Her mouth a hard line, she asked, "Why should I trust you?"

Worf growled irritably. "Why," he stressed the word, "should we trust you? You were the Russian's property."

"Not true." Katya shook her head in vehement denial. "He stole me from my rightful owner."

"Who was...?" prompted Riker with keen interest.

The woman looked from one to the other again, a slow careful scrutiny of them both, but remained stubbornly silent.

Worf ground his teeth with impatience and swung on his heel. "She's got to be a spy, Philip. I'm going to search her quarters for something I *might* have missed before." Without a backward glance he headed up the passageway and disappeared around the slight bend. They could hear him climbing the stairway.

"I'm no spy!" she spat furiously, and glared at the First Officer. "He'll find nothing!"

"Prove it," responded Riker shortly and followed the Klingon.

Katya came into the bridge where the two men were going through some paperwork. Both elected to ignore her presence after they realised she was standing in the doorway. She watched them both, her features puzzled.

Eventually, she moved further into the room and glanced about herself with evident curiosity. The small viewscreen captured her attention, and she stared, enthralled, at the vista of black space and the bright points of the stars as they moved past them.

Her mouth open slightly in admiration, Katya came closer and leaned over the chairs Worf and Riker sat in. "It's so beautiful. A computer enhancement?" she asked curiously.

"Computer enhancement," replied Riker in agreement, and thought, *How does she know?* He traded a swift glance with Worf which said 'Are we making progress?' and 'What the hell?'.

She suddenly realised how close she had come to the two men and backed off. Worf shook his head, and clenched his jaw.

"Why are you here, Katya?" asked Riker quickly, before she decided to run away again. He wondered how far she thought she could get if they were really determined. He wondered what she thought she could do?

She blinked at him, and hesitated, then said slowly. "Can I sit?"

Riker waved her to a chair, and leaned forward propping his head on a fist. "So...?" he enquired.

Worf settled back in the chair to listen, and folded his arms across his chest.

Shifting uncomfortably under their examination, Katya began her tale. "I was a trainee in a Pleasure House when the Russian stole me from the Madam of the house. She'd taken me from my parents when I was small, and promised them she'd treat me well. He - " she made a rude gesture - "the filth, saw me, and decided to purchase me. Madam would not sell." Katya raised her head proudly, tilting her chin at them. "She knew I was worthy of more than that pig, and my training destined me for consortship with a great man. Hah!" She gave a scornful little laugh. "I tried to kill him, but I was

unsuccessful."

"Well," mused Riker; he frowned at Worf. "Does that answer your most pressing query?"

Worf leaned forward then, and pursed his mouth slightly. "You tried to kill him?" When he received an affirmative nod, he went on, "I do not understand why he did not kill you and be done with it?"

Her eyes glittered with savage fury, and her face grew still and cold. "He would've, if I hadn't been useful to him. If I hadn't been worth more alive. If I'd been killed, then Madam would've made sure he was animal fodder as soon as she'd found him." She scanned them both with her clear blue gaze. "That's why he sold me to you... to get Madam's henchmen off his trail for a time."

The Security Chief cocked his head on one side. "Indeed?" He was not impressed with the information. "He attempted to rape you?" Worf probed further, mercilessly.

"No," she said, lowering her head. Looking at her hands she clenched them tightly so the knuckles showed whitely under the taut skin. "One of his... *friends* -" she spat it out contemptuously, then lifting her head they saw she was blazing with a hate so bright it nearly blinded them. "I would have killed him, too, if I hadn't been stopped."

"Er... Katya, was it him you nearly castrated?" Riker wanted to know.

She shook her head, and gave them a half-smile. "No. But I wish I had. It was Gork who got in the way."

"What else do you know about the Russian?" said Worf, watching her closely. The chair creaked slightly as he

leaned back and waited for her to answer.

"That's all, I swear, Krith." She shrugged. "I know he steals people. Sometimes I've heard others crying in the warehouse, but he kept me separate. Only when he wanted to parade me to a potential buyer could I come out of the room. Even then he kept me blindfolded."

I see," Worf said. "So you have no idea where he would take his *stock* after he acquired it?"

"No," she replied.

Worf turned back to the screen and the display. The system the Russian seemed to be heading for was getting closer. They would be there in a couple of days, and he had hoped she would have more information they could use. At least they knew for sure now he *was* the one they were looking for, and perhaps they would soon be able to get to the bottom of the mystery of the slave trade in this area. Who was at the base of it, perhaps. He did not like mysteries.

Riker smiled at her and turned on his charm. "Would you like to eat?"

Worf swung the chair round to face her again, and said, "You will eat in the galley from now on; I will not get you any more food. If you want to eat, you can get it yourself."

Katya shifted under Riker's gaze, and responded to Worf's words with a soft, "Very well, Krith." She got up without answering the Commander.

Riker raised a brow, and Worf rumbled with amusement. This was one of the few occasions he had seen the Commander's legendary prowess with the opposite sex thud like a lead bell. "It seems, Philip -" he turned back to the

computer simulation - "that she is uninterested."

Riker eyed the Klingon. "Thanks," he said dryly. "Thanks a bunch." Then spurred by mischief, he remarked, "So, that leaves you." He leaned towards Worf. "Do you think she might be interested in you?"

Worf glanced at the Commander from the corner of his eyes, and wisely declined to answer.

They had a rude awakening coming. The trace on the Russian had given such steady impulses they had not reckoned with it failing, and when it did the last Worf was able to say for certain was that Vasili Ivanovich had veered from the course he had been on to take another route. The new route sent them into fraught territory. This was a real no-man's land where the scum of society - all societies - abounded. Here were the drug runners, the smugglers of contraband, the Pleasure Houses, the nameless filth which would never truly be swept away; where misfits abounded and an honest man was as rare as a Klingon who liked tribbles. Here you truly could squeeze blood from a stone, or, perhaps, stab it out.

Riker surveyed the scenery as they came in to land. The space port was functional, barely. The technology was a conglomeration of bits and pieces borrowed from countless civilisations, and most of it, at least the bits he could see, was hopelessly outmoded. "Nice," he muttered disparagingly, and straightened from leaning over the back of the chair.

Worf powered the vessel down, and stood, picking up his phaser as he went. He checked its setting, then slid it into the belt at his waist. "We'd better find out

what we can before the inhabitants of this world decide to cannibalise the Odysseus."

"I agree," said Riker grimly. He jerked his head in the direction of the galley which was where Katya spent most of her time. "What about her? Do we take her with us, or do we trust her enough to leave her on her own?"

Worf sent a long look down the corridor, and turned back to the Commander. "I do not think she knows how to fly this ship, and she would be a liability on the surface. She might prove too tempting for someone."

"Might try to steal her, you mean?" Riker enquired, but he shook his head. "We've only got her word that she doesn't know how to fly - what if she's lying?" His blue eyes gazed at Worf piercingly. "I'd rather not take her, too, but if we're stranded here..." He trailed off, knowing the Klingon could add two and two for himself.

Worf growled; he was not happy about this in the slightest. "She must be disguised." He considered the proposal he had just made. Not as a boy! That *was* a ludicrous idea. She was too damn pretty to be a boy. The Klingon ran a hand wearily over his face for a second, and shook his head. "I do not know what as."

"Can't we - er - " Riker sketched an outline in the air - "um... cover her up some more?"

Worf shrugged, and made his way to the galley with the Commander close on his heels. Katya was sitting at the central table with a book open in which she had her nose firmly planted. She raised her spectacular head when she heard them enter.

"We have arrived," Worf said without preamble, "and we must take you with us." He gave her a dark look, and pointed towards the clothing hold. "We will have to find something more suitable for you to wear."

Katya spared them a curious glance, but got up from her chair and headed in the direction Worf indicated. She climbed down the steps, and went into the hold. She waited for the Klingon to show up.

Seeing he was unaccompanied by Grainger, Katya came as close to him as she ever had. "What would you have me wear, Krith?" she asked in her husky voice.

Worf had busied himself searching through the piles of things. He was looking for something which would not attract any attention to its wearer, and something she could cover her face with. Her next comment gave him pause.

"Do you want me, Krith?"

He stopped what he was doing, then resumed his search, ignoring her. "You will wear this," he said, and displayed a garment which was hooded and cut on more generous lines than the clothes she preferred. The colour was a nondescript grey with a faint blue stripe.

Katya leaned towards him provocatively. "Do you?" she insisted; her breasts pushed against the filmy material of the dress she wore, rising gently with each breath.

Worf eyed her doubtfully. He wondered where this conversation was going to lead. Pretending he did not understand was not a reasonable alternative. "You would be better served by addressing your question to Grainger," he responded gruffly. "Put this on."

His tone brooked no argument, but as he stepped forward to hand her the garment she brushed it aside and put her hand on his arm, the first time she had volunteered a physical contact of any kind.

"I want you," she stated, and slid the hand up his arm.

Worf took a deep breath, and huffed it out sharply. "I am not Human, Katya, and this is inappropriate. I do not have the time to address such -" he took her hand from his arm and allowed it to drop - "nonsense."

Stung by his rejection but daunted not in the slightest, Katya took the clothing and wrapped it around herself. From the depths of the hood her eyes flashed dangerously; she enunciated carefully so she left him in no doubt. "I do not want Grainger. *You* are my choice, Krith." She moved closer to him, tilted her head up. "Madam gave me leave to choose who I wanted. You are he."

Worf stared into violet depths for a long moment while he digested the contents of that little speech. "I'm... honoured," he said at last with a slight bow, but shook his head. "This is still inappropriate, Katya." He hesitated, then smiled grimly. "Perhaps you would care to discuss this at a more apropos time?"

She swung on her heel, and went through the door to the passageway, stopped and said over her shoulder, "I do not take insult, Krith. I know you desire me." Her hips swayed seductively as she walked away.

Worf regarded the empty space where she had been, and licked his lips; his mouth was dry. He set off after her, but not before he allowed her to get a good way in front. This was going to present some difficulties. He was way

out of his depth, and considered briefly asking Riker's advice. Then, perhaps not.

Riker was waiting impatiently for them. He paced up and down the loading bay and for the umpteenth time checked his phaser; he turned to face the returning footsteps and saw Katya come into view. He nodded with satisfaction; she would pass. Worf was seconds behind, and gave the Commander a quick jerk of his head in acknowledgement.

"We ready?" Riker asked unnecessarily, and when he had received an affirmative from Worf, began to open the hatch. Katya chose to pipe up then.

"Grainger," she said, "I am not armed." She folded her arms around her body, and waited for one of them to make a comment.

Riker shook his head regretfully. "I'm sorry, Katya, but we still don't know whether we can trust you. I'd feel safer if you aren't carrying a weapon." His mouth twisted as he watched her reaction - which was one of anger. "Besides, Krith'll keep an eye on you."

Worf growled, and the Commander narrowed his eyes. "S that a problem?"

The Klingon regarded the Human with mixed feelings, and could see Katya's back was straighter. "No, Philip, there's no problem with that."

"Good," responded Riker, and promptly dismissed the conversation. He keyed in the manual door entry/exit codes and stood aside as they slid upwards.

Planetary air rushed into the bay bringing with it the fresh damp smell of rain, and droplets of water spattered their faces as a gentle wind brought them into the interior. They stepped out onto the

gantry, and looked around.

There was not a lot to see. There were a few smaller vessels docked and some people moving about, but not many. Worf moved ahead of the others and started on his way down the pathway. Sticking to his side like plaster was Katya, and behind came the First Officer.

The sky was grey, thick with rain clouds, but they were lucky as yet; the clouds held onto their burden jealously, allowing only a few spots to drift earthward. There was a stink in the air which Riker had no trouble identifying as industrial pollution. This world had not, it seemed, completely cleared its atmosphere from contaminants.

Worf stepped off the gantry at last, and together the three of them moved towards the largest building in the oddly mismatched set which made up the space port. Going through the door was almost like entering another world. This was even quieter than they could have believed possible.

Riker sent a desultory glance about the place, and pointed in the direction of a desk. "I'll try there," he said, and made his way over to it. He consulted with a woman who waved her arms about, then settled down to indicate something to the Commander. She wrote on a slip of paper, and he smiled at her and returned to his companions.

"The lady was good enough to give me directions, Krith, to a decent hotel."

Worf grimaced. "What about picking up the trail of the Russian?"

Riker shrugged. "Dunno. She didn't recognise the hologram I showed her - " he amended the statement - "or, at least, if she did, she wasn't saying." His

eyes slitted. "Close-mouthed I'd say, Krith. Probably didn't want to get involved in anything which might cause problems."

Worf grunted, took the paper from Riker's hand and read what was on it. "Then," he said, "we should not waste time talking, but find this hotel."

The hotel proved to be a short ride away in a ground car, and they piled out into the lobby of the place. It looked much like hotels anywhere. Featureless, barren and totally functional. That it was down at heel and utterly seedy was a hazard they came to accept. There were no visible staff.

"Automated?" Riker asked Worf, who raised his shoulders in reply. The Commander raised an eyebrow before standing in front of a turbolift which slid its doors open for them. They moved upwards.

They exited into a passageway that was both dark and dingy. The lighting was feeble and there was the stale smell of uncleaned corners lurking in the air. As they moved past each door they could see a light which said 'Occupied' or not, as the case may be. They had to travel some distance down the passage before finding adjacent rooms.

"Slum sweet slum," murmured Riker as the door to the room swung inwards. He went inside, and wrinkled his nose fastidiously. "Talk about basic, Krith," he said, and went to a window, throwing it open. At least they *could* open.

He threw his jacket off onto the bed and plonked into the only chair in the room. He crossed a leg over one knee, resting a hand on the ankle. "Well," he said with a forced air of joviality.

Worf's face was grim. "As a base from which to work..." He trailed off, and exchanged a look with the Commander.

"Speaking of which," Riker went on with hardly a pause, "we'd best be about our business." He chewed his bottom lip for a moment as he regarded Katya. "Can't take her."

"No," agreed Worf. "She will have to be left here, Philip."

Katya turned to the Klingon with her eyes afire. "I will not stay here alone, Krith." Then she astounded them both by saying, "I know this place. I was born here."

Stunned, Riker's eyes widened in disbelief. "What?!"

"I-was-born-here." Katya repeated slowly as if for the benefit of a congenital idiot. She flicked a look to both of them. "Madam's establishment is not far from here."

Riker groaned. "Hell!"

Worf gripped the woman's arm and swung her to face him. "Then you *must* stay here. We cannot allow the feud between your mistress and the Russian to -"

Riker interrupted. "Hold it," he said, and went over to Katya. "If we were to return you to Madam it would get you off our backs, and -" Worf was looking as if he agreed with every word - "we can find out if she's heard from the Russian."

Katya laughed, a pretty bell-like sound. Worf and Riker acquired irritated expressions.

"What," asked the Commander without the slightest hint of reciprocal

amusement in his voice, "is so damn funny?"

Containing her amusement, she drew down the hood which covered her face so effectively. "If you go with me to Madam asking about the Russian, all you'll get for your trouble is dead." She gave them both a little half-smile. "I only tell you this because I want -"

Worf cut in hastily. "She will kill us?" he asked to clarify their position, and received an affirmative nod for his trouble. "Why?"

Katya shrugged and went over to the window. She set her hands on the sill and leaned out into the wind and rain, breathing in the moisture laden air with a kind of eager relish. Her sable hair ruffled gently in the breeze - it had grown in the seven days they had had her with them. She turned back, her eyes alight with bitterness. Thoughts in turmoil, she wondered if the moment was yet? No. A distraction was still in order.

Quietly, she said, "I don't want to go back there. I want to stay with you." Her gaze was directed straight at Worf, and he stiffened slightly in response to her words.

Worf asked again, aware of the curiosity now roused in the Commander, "Why will she kill us?"

"To tidy up a loose end, and to make certain she gives a fitting warning to anyone who might try something similar."

Riker could not believe his ears. "So, basically because we took you off the Russian's hands we defaulted, and are guilty by association?" He threw up his hands in disgust, then ran them through his already unruly mop of hair. "Chrissake!"

The Commander moved towards Katya with every intention of taking her to sit in the chair - good psychological tactics - so he and Worf could loom over her. She darted out of his reach with amazing agility and stood directly behind the Klingon, a slender hand on his upper arm.

Stumped, annoyed and totally flummoxed by undertones of things he had not yet grasped, the Commander swore vehemently and inventively at some length. "Krith?" he asked exasperatedly, remembering in time to use the alias.

In reply, Worf turned on his heel, grasping Katya by both her arms. He moved her to the chair by the simple expedient of picking her up. "Philip wants to know if there is anything else we need to know? And so do I," he growled.

Katya put her hand on his face, smiled bewitchingly up at him. She lowered her eyelids briefly, then raised them. "If Vasili Ivanovich has been here, then he's dead already and not worthy of your attention." Her words were cool, and she dismissed the life of another being as if it was of little importance to her. She added, "But then so is your trail." Her lovely mouth curved into another smile which she directed full-force at Worf.

So that's how the land lies, thought a surprised Riker; he could see the Klingon's evident discomfort with the knowledge. "Maybe," he responded, then joined Worf and leaned over her. "But he might not be. I don't believe he'd've come here to be killed. It's my belief he drew us here deliberately." He shook his head to try to clear his thundering thought processes. "What I don't understand is why... " He halted and tilted his head at the woman who was following every

movement Worf made. He gave a short bark of laughter. "Krith," he said, "I want to talk to you... in private." He jabbed a finger at the other door, and Worf followed him through to the adjoining room.

"Sir?" asked the Klingon. Worf's face became mulish when the penny dropped, and Riker had not even spoken yet. "No."

"Worf - " Riker put his hand on his friend's shoulder - "to repeat your own words to you, 'Whatever works'."

The Security Chief cast a glance in the direction of Katya, and rumbled, "Sir, I protest. This is not a circumstance to merit such methods."

Riker raised a brow, and leaned against the wall. "Methinks you doth protest too much, my friend." Worf bridled, started to reply, but was forestalled by Riker holding up a hand. "Look, who's it hurting?" He grinned, and rubbed his chin, "It's not exactly the most onerous task you've ever undertaken. I mean, it's not as if there aren't compensations. She is very beautiful."

Worf ground his teeth audibly, and gave the First Officer a filthy look. "I do not want to do this, sir."

Riker's eyes grew steely. "We need the information, Lieutenant. Can you think of a better way to get it? Because if you can, I'd like to hear it now."

Reluctantly, Worf shook his head. He had to admit what the Commander was suggesting was logical, so why did he feel as if he was about to do something underhand? It felt dishonourable, that must be it. Or was it his Human values rearing their ugly head again?

Riker watched the struggle going on in the Klingon's face, and blew out a breath. "For you, she'll behave herself. The Russian didn't reckon with her falling for one of us. That's an ace up our sleeve. Whatever she knows, Worf, she'll tell because she likes you and wants to."

"I will interrogate her now, sir," replied Worf, and started through the door.

Riker caught his arm. "Uh-uh. What you do is treat her like a lady." He released him. "Give her what she wants, Worf, and she'll be eating out of your hand."

The Security Chief grimaced slightly, set his shoulders and went back through the door with the Commander at his side.

Katya was leaning out of the window again, and following the goings on in the street below with keen interest. She glanced at Worf as he joined her, but returned to watching the moving scenery.

Worf hesitated, and Riker said, "I'm going to see what I can find out." He cleared his throat. "Krith will stay here with you."

The woman did not even spare him the slightest flicker of her attention, but murmured softly, "Do not go near the waterfront, Philip Grainger. There is much danger to be found there."

Surprised, Riker replied, "I'll bear that in mind, thank you." He had a quick, low discussion with Worf then stepped out into the dingy corridor.

Worf sat in the chair in silence; he regarded the Human woman closely. Neither spoke, and the quiet grew as ominous as a thundercloud, tense and thick with words which could not be

spoken by him, and which she had no idea how, or whether, she should.

After what seemed like a very long time, Katya left the window and came back into the room. Sitting on the floor in front of Worf, she rested her hands in her lap and stared pointedly at his feet.

Suddenly, she said, "Grainger doesn't trust me."

Worf snorted. "The feeling is mutual, I think."

She lifted her eyes to his face. "Nor do you, Krith." Her face darkened with emotion. "Why do you deny the truth?"

Worf shook his head. "I am here to ensure you do not take yourself off somewhere we cannot find you, and also to make certain *you* do not betray us."

"The truth, Krith," Katya insisted. Parting her mouth slightly, she leant in to him. "You want me, and he has said you must be 'nice' to me." She gave a tiny laugh, one that was self-mocking. Huskily, she went on, "So... *be* nice to me. I want you to."

Worf got up and moved away from her. "Yes, Grainger told me to treat you well, but that does not mean what you think."

Katya frowned as she watched his stiff back. Not certain still, she tilted her head on one side and chewed her bottom lip. Then she asked, "But why... why buy me if you do not want me?"

"We want the Bretarrth," Worf said and left it at that. He heard her rise from the floor, and stand behind him. He felt a small hand reach up to touch his shoulder tentatively, then it fell away.

Katya moved into his line of sight,

peering into his face, trying to grasp the situation. "I know... I heard what you said to Vasili Ivanovich at the time - " she shook her head in wonderment - "but... I thought you were bargaining." Worf could see her feelings racing over her face all too clearly, but they were mostly ambiguous. "You never wanted me?" Katya took his silence for acquiescence, and turned away. "Then I will go back to Madam."

The Klingon reached out a hand to touch her, and dropped it. "Katya," he said, almost gently, "I did try to tell you."

Distraction! She spun round to face him, and, before he realised what she was about, hit him across the face as hard as she could. "Damn you!" she spat; her eyes glittered savagely, then she sobered, regained control and withdrew into haughty grandeur. "What else do you want to know about Aldorn III, Krith?"

Worf controlled his temper; he had a feeling he probably deserved the blow, though his first reaction had been to return it. He put a hand on her shoulder, could feel her trembling with rage and humiliation, and spoke at last. "Have you overheard the Russian talking about who he would speak to here?"

She nodded, a quick jerky movement. "Yes. One Waldo Trelawn, a fence." She scowled, and asked the thing on her mind. "What will you do with me now?"

Worf cocked his head at her. "Take you with me, of course." He sounded surprised she had to ask. "Leaving you here would be neglectful of me." Moving to where she had been sitting he picked up the robe from the floor, and tossed it to her. Reluctantly, she put it back on, and adjusted the hood around her face again.

"Why take me at all?" Her voice was almost a whisper.

"I do not know this city, Katya. You do." His mouth thinned. "Besides, I can keep a close watch on you." He held out his hand. "Shall we go?" Katya placed her hand in his large one; Worf stared at her, accepted the gesture and closed his fingers around it.

They stepped through the door into the passageway and made their way to the lift, getting in and travelling down into the lobby and then out into the grey afternoon of Aldorn III. Worf headed for a ground car, but Katya hung back, shaking her head.

"Why?" he asked and she pointed surreptitiously at some surly-looking individuals who were loitering around the vicinity of the vehicles. "Do you know them?" A quick affirmative nod was all the answer he got. "We will walk then."

Katya nodded, and slipped her hand into the crook of his arm, holding him tightly. They managed to get past the men without attracting attention and then moved off sedately in the direction Katya indicated.

"How far?" Worf wanted to know.

"About one and a half kilometres," she replied, and moved closer to him still.

Concerned she was entering his body space, the Klingon tried to put distance between them, but Katya raised her head and indicated 'no'.

She explained hurriedly, seeing his patience was about to desert him altogether. "This way we look... more - " she gave him a humourless expression - "natural. Like lovers." Worf looked revolted, but she hurried on. "Kiss me,

and they will think no more of us."

Worf ground his teeth - he had to give her credit, she kept on trying - and said, "Not even to distract them will I do that."

"Then you're a fool," she snarled, and let go of his arm and raced away from him.

Worf growled. *Damn the woman*, he thought. *Where the hell is she going?* He jogged after her, easily catching her up and retaking her arm. He was surprised when she threw herself into his arms. Pushing her away, he stared down into angry blue eyes, but watched her put on quite an act for their unappreciative audience. He allowed her then to put her head on his chest, and he circled her with his arms. Then, turning his back to the men, lowered his head and put his mouth close to her ear.

"Good enough?" he enquired, and she turned her face and brushed her mouth over his.

"No." Katya smiled thinly. "But that was."

Worf seized her by the shoulders, his fingers biting into the flesh, and clenched his jaw. "This has gone far enough!" He was angry now, but she did not flinch nor did she try to get away.

"Krith," she whispered and slitted her eyes until all he could see was a faint gleam of deep blue. He could see desire now burning in her - desire...! She leant into him, her mouth parted. "I want you, Krith." The words seemed to stick in her throat, but they crept past her lips, not unwilling now. "Truly," she sighed.

Hoarsely, Worf enquired, "Even though you know our purpose in purchasing you was not for yourself?"

The scent of her was clean, fresh, intriguing.

When she nodded agreement, Worf dragged her unceremoniously where they could not easily be overseen and tipped her face up in his hands. He experimented and kissed her; Katya's response was immediate - hot, demanding; she moaned softly in her throat.

The Klingon detached himself and pushed her away. "There is no time for this," he said, still holding her chin in a hand.

"No," she agreed, her eyes consuming him by degrees. "But there's always later." She placed a hand over his, turned her face to kiss his palm, and slipped it down to his chest. "Later," she breathed, and the word held promise.

Katya started to move away, setting off for the parts of the city she knew so well. The parts where it was not wise to travel if you were a stranger, the parts where travelling in twos - well-armed - was advisable. Worf followed on her heels, feeling the prickle of unseen eyes watching them and weighing whether they were good victims. It made the hair on the back of his neck creep.

As they moved further into the slum the buildings became less and less appealing - not that they had been anyway! - and dirty. Squalor started to show, and Worf found himself taking in the poverty of the scenery with grim attention. Katya, for her part, did not notice. She stepped over or round the mounds of rotting filth with neat quick steps.

She sped ahead of him, certain of her destination, and turned a corner. That was when he was jumped, metres from their target - a small, unobtrusive shop

front. They overlooked Worf's companion, centred their attention on him. There were three of them. Large Human males with keen anticipation, hungry faces and sharp knives.

Worf soon found they were not averse to using foul means to subdue their victims, and he managed to escape the grip of one to move into the reach of another. This one backed him against a wall with the brightly gleaming blade in his hand, and as the Human raised it to plunge into the Klingon's jugular, his eyes widened in surprise; he coughed. Blood, red as damask roses, spurted from his mouth, then trickled from his nose. He fell forwards, hitting his head soundly against the brick of the wall.

Taking advantage of the bewilderment the other two assailants showed at the sudden unexpected death of their companion, Worf phasered them. They fell to the ground stunned.

Bending, he started a systematic search of their clothing, and heard the patter of feet come towards him. He watched as Katya bent over the dead mugger, removed the stiletto, then buried it neatly, quickly, without a qualm into the the gap between ear and throat pushing firmly into the brain of the man closest to her. The body twitched in response, neuromuscular spasms, and she removed the blade, wiped it and approached the remaining live man. There was a fixed, determined set to Katya's face as she bore down on her victim.

No delicately nurtured Human female she! Worf's mind raced even as he gripped her wrist savagely. This was a ruthless barbarian, and he was truly shocked by her behaviour. He snarled at her, shaking the dagger free from her numbed fingers. "We need information. Who they are." He picked up the dagger

and recognised it as his.

"I know who they are," she replied, glaring at him and trying to shake some feeling back into her arm.

"Then... we must find out *why* we were attacked," he stated. He heaved the man into a sitting position, then wrapped his arms around the unconscious Human's chest, lifted and dragged him to the shop front.

The door was slightly ajar, and Worf kicked it with some force sending it flying open. He jerked his head at Katya who went through in front of him. If there were more enemies here, he felt certain they would have already made their presence known.

The Klingon sent a searching glance around the interior, and growled deep in his chest. There was a body half-hidden behind the counter - a leg could be seen sticking out at an odd angle. Katya scurried to investigate.

"Trelawn?" Worf hazarded and dropped his burden none too gently. He joined her. "Dead?"

The woman nodded, and briskly ran expert fingers through pockets and clothing. She grinned suddenly, then held something out in her hand to Worf.

He took the item from her, and scanned it. "Does this hold some significance for you?" he asked, but before she could answer he went on. "Who were these men?"

Katya's predatory smile did not waver even slightly. "They're Madam's thugs," she replied, and settled back on her haunches with an eager light in her eyes. She turned them up to his face. "She must have Grainger."

"Where?" Worf snapped.

"The wharf," she stated simply and rose to her feet, crossed to the remaining mugger who was starting to come round. She kicked him viciously in the temple and he subsided with a groan. "We must find Grainger soon, Krith, or she will kill him."

Worf grunted. "Do you know how to get there?" He had other questions to ask, but they could wait for the moment.

Katya drew a deep breath, and gazed at him speculatively, her head cocked on one side. She shook her head. "You - " she pointed a slender finger at the Klingon - "are not what you say you are. I picked that knife from you like you were a baby... " she trailed off, her eyes narrow with thought. "If you are not Krith, who are you?" Although she knew the truth, the question had to be asked.

Worf said nothing. In fact he was impressed by Katya's powers of reasoning; he decided prevarication was a wise route at the moment. "I knew you took it," he replied, and left it at that. Let her think what she wanted for the time being. Explanations would come later, if need be. "Now, show me," he commanded, and she obeyed.

Before they left the shop, Katya stirred the body of the unconscious Human with her toe. "What about him?"

Worf considered, then stunned him again with the phaser. He would not regain consciousness for quite a long time. Returning the phaser to his waist, he said, "He will not trouble us now."

"Should've killed him," Katya murmured, but started out of the door when Worf gripped her elbow and propelled her forcibly through it.

"Perhaps," he responded.

Riker struggled against his bonds without much hope. His captors had appeared to know what they were doing, and he could not feel any slack in the ropes. They burned his wrists and ankles, and he cursed silently the circumstances which had befallen him. Waldo Trelawn, their only hope of information, was dead. Messily dead. An old fashioned projectile weapon was just as efficient at killing as a phaser, but it was not a clean death, and he had been unable to prevent it. He guessed he was lucky to come away with his own life.

A pair of legs appeared in front of his face - he was lying on his side with his arms and legs lashed together behind him - and stopped. They were a woman's feet, strapped into high spiked heels, and as he watched she dropped the remains of a cheroot to the floor and ground it out.

The legs bent, and a face moved out of the shadows to hold a light in his eyes. The face belonged to a square-jawed female with light grey eyes, and ash-blonde hair, her mouth a painted, scarlet gash set in stone. Pencilled brows drew together over an aquiline nose, and the mouth moved, making shapes which the Commander did not understand.

Riker groaned, but could not hear himself. Then he remembered. He had been hit - damn hard if the way his head felt was any indication! - on the back of his skull. He could dimly recall the shapes of his assailants and being carried to wherever it was they were holding him, but that was all. There was the faint smell of stale water nearby, so he assumed he was being held near the waterfront.

Just great, he thought ruefully, still

trying to shake some sense into his skull.
I hope Worf'll come looking for me soon.

The woman grasped his chin roughly in her hand, turning his head this way, then that, so she could examine him thoroughly. The grey eyes were penetrating, shrewd, and hard as granite. Cruel eyes. Eyes which peered into his soul and found it wanting. Eyes which could, he was sure, read every misdeed, mistake or simple misdemeanour he had ever made. They were not searching for the good in him, he did not think.

The grip on his jaw relaxed, and she allowed his head to droop back down to the dusty wooden floorboards. Dusting her hands, she gave a sign, and Riker found himself hauled into an upright position - more or less.

He got a better view of her now. The face topped a body which was still voluptuous but was starting to feel the effects of gravity. Her tight dress stretched over her hips, and she placed her hands on them. Tilting her head, she asked, "Do you hear me now, Grainger?"

Riker was surprised he had heard her at all, and it must have shown in his face because she laughed. It was not a pleasant sound, and stopped as abruptly as it had begun.

"Well?" she smiled the question, and snapped her fingers. A man jumped forward with another cheroot, which she put to her mouth and dragged on with relish. She blew a wreath of blue smoke into his face. "Well?" she demanded.

Eyes watering from the sting of cigar smoke, the Commander coughed, revolted. "Yes," he nodded quickly, and coughed again.

"Where is she?" the woman asked, and leant towards him again.

Riker was puzzled for a few minutes, then he realised exactly who he was dealing with here. Madam! He licked his dry lips. "With my partner," he replied.

Madam flared her thin nostrils as she took a deep breath and regarded the First Officer. "Wrong, Grainger. She is not." The woman put out the glowing end of the cheroot and touched it lightly to the Commander's shrinking flesh.

The stench of roasting meat assailed Riker's nose, and he gritted his teeth in an effort to keep down the bile which had risen in his throat. He gasped, "She was with him, Madam."

The woman ground the end down in another sensitive area. "Try again," she suggested coldly.

Riker felt beads of sweat begin to break out on his forehead as he endured the cigar's lit end again - this time in the base of his neck. As he fought for an answer which would please her, Madam puffed on it, bringing it to bright life once more.

"She... she must be back at the Odysseus with Krith by now. I told him to get the hell out of here with her if - " the cigar approached again, slowed as he stumbled on - "if he didn't hear from me in four hours." The lies tumbled from his lips now - it was surprising how quickly he could think of them, so surprising he almost believed them himself.

Madam grunted. "I don't believe you, Grainger. I want her back. She'll know where the Russian has gone."

Riker shook his head. "No," he said desperately as she stubbed his arm; he could not help himself, he cried out in pain this time. Sweat rolled down his back. "Katya swears she knows nothing

of the movements of the Russian."

The woman threw back her head and roared with laughter. "Surely, Grainger, you don't believe that lying little whore. I thought you were a man with more sense than that?"

Bemused, Riker could only stare at his torturer. What the hell was she talking about? He said, "I don't understand. She's your property, and you want her back. Don't you?"

Madam's crimson mouth drew back in a smile, flashing white teeth. "While it's true I want her, she's no property of mine, Grainger."

Riker tilted his head, uncomprehending. "Not your property?" he repeated like an idiot. She shook her head, and he rasped, "Then what...?"

Grey eyes flashing like mercury, she juttied her head forward to the First Officer. "Now *that* is what I intend to find out, Grainger. Who or what she is." Pausing for effect, she drew on the cheroot again, knocked the ash on its end off, and smiled. "And - " she patted his cheek - "where the Russian has taken the Bretarrth."

Where Katya was leading him, Worf had no idea. He had taken as much notice as he could of the narrow winding journey, the many turns, the double-backs and the hiding in shadows. Eventually, after what seemed to have been an interminable amount of time, she drew to a halt beside some ancient-looking buildings with broken windows and flaking paintwork.

The wind had picked up a little and it carried the taint of salt. There was water, a largish body of it, close at hand.

Katya reached out with her hand, and motioned to Worf who came and stood alongside of her. She gave a tiny movement of her head to indicate what they were looking for. The building she had pointed out did not appear very much different from the others along the wharf, then she pulled at his sleeve and they hid in the shadows.

"He'll be in there," she stated, and held her hand out expectantly. "I'll need a weapon, Krith. Give me one of yours."

Worf came closer to her, and regarded the building, then directed his attention back to the woman. "Where in there is Grainger likely to be, Katya?." He kept his voice a low rumble, and checked his own weaponry. He scanned the building carefully for entrances that might be useful. "We need a plan," he said.

Katya thought, then smiled at him. "I'll distract their attention from you, and then you can take them out with the phaser."

"Fine," Worf responded warily; he handed her the stiletto before continuing, "surely we need to go and search the place before -"

She cut in impatiently, saying fiercely, "No! There's only one possible place they could have him and it's on the upper floor. There is a shaft leading from it which goes directly into the sewers and then straight out to sea. It's Madam's preferred way of dealing with corpses." She raised her hand, pointing upwards. "If you look you should be able to make out the entrance to the warehouse over there. Go through there and keep going for about thirty metres, turn left and it'll bring you to the roof space -"

Worf grasped her, glared at her distrustfully. "How do you know these

things?." He shook her slightly, and she put her hands on his chest to steady herself.

"I do," Katya answered quietly. "You have no choice, Krith, you must trust me now or Grainger will end up Torvelm fodder." She watched as the Klingon subsided slightly, saw him reluctantly shelve his suspicion and back down. He waited for her to go on. She continued, satisfied he would listen, "Once in the roof space, you'll find a trap door. This opens directly onto the upper floor." She gripped the front of his jacket. "Wait until you hear me."

"How will I know it's you?" Worf asked, still holding her shoulders firmly.

"You'll know," she replied grimly, her eyes dark with something bitter as gall. Her features lightened and she put both hands on his face. "Be careful, Krith, I beg you."

Worf took her wrists. "I will take no harm," he assured her. He stared intently into her face for a moment, then released her and made his way silently over to the place she had indicated.

Katya watched him go, and wondered when she should tell them the truth. *Soon*, she thought, then something occurred to her and she gave a tiny bark of laughter. When would they tell *her* the truth?

Riker wheezed in a breath, and groaned out loud. The pain in his ribs was unbearable; he wished Madam would get the hell on with it, whatever it was she proposed to do to him. One of her thugs had taken sadistic pleasure in booting him several times in the ribs, and she had watched with evident enjoyment. He could not help wondering what sort of

people enjoyed such venality - where did they come from, how did they acquire their taste? As he wavered in and out of consciousness he wished the Enterprise was at hand.

A rough hand seized a handful of his hair and forced his head back, straining the vertebrae in his neck almost to snapping point. Madam licked her gash of a mouth, and sneered at him; she was angry. "So, Grainger, do you tell? The report I've had tells me your friend has disappeared with Katya. They've killed two of my men. Where would they go? Spit it out! It'll go better for you if you do!"

Riker feebly tried to shake his head - he hurt! - and closed his bloodshot eyes to try to shut out the glare of the lamp in his face. "Don't know," he said hoarsely, then heard a commotion. The hand tearing his hair out by the roots relaxed, and fell away, and he also heard Madam chuckle evilly.

"Ah, Katya!" Madam moved towards the dimly seen figure who waited quietly. "Now I have you, my dear. Time for you to start talking, don't you think?"

Riker strained to see Katya - *Where the hell is Worf?* he thought, and struggled again, rasping in air. *Dammit! Where is he?*

Katya laughed softly, and moved into the light. She allowed the cadaver she was holding to drop, and whirled in time to see another man sneak up behind her. Wasting no time, she dived out of his reach and threw the dagger in her hand straight at his throat.

Above them, Worf saw the disturbance and stunned the woman known as Madam. He jumped down from the trap door - a height of maybe four metres - and went to the

Commander's aid. He was angered by what he found, and ground his teeth. "Are you able to walk?" he asked, concerned.

Riker managed a weak smile, and said, "Don't know 'til I try, my friend." He gripped Worf's arm with surprising strength suddenly, and whispered. "Katya, where is she?"

Worf scanned the room. "Out of earshot, sir. Why?"

"She's not... not the... property - " the First Officer gritted his teeth with effort - "of Madam. She's... she's an impostor."

Worf scowled. "You know this for certain?." He received an affirmative nod, and the Commander subsided, allowing the Klingon to fling an arm across his shoulders. "We must get back to the Odysseus, sir."

Riker managed a chuckle, though it hurt worse than perdition, and agreed. "You'll not... find me... arguing with that."

Katya made an appearance. She looked pleased, and Worf eyed her distrustfully. She bent over Madam, and pursed her lips, obviously toying with killing her. Her booted foot nudged the woman cruelly, then she bent and forced back arms and legs into unnatural poses. Glancing up from her labour, she said, "Krith, help me tie her up."

Worf set the First Officer down carefully, and crossed to where Katya was holding Madam. "You are not going to kill her?" he asked, puzzled. "Why the others and not her?"

Katya sighed slightly. "She's too valuable alive, Krith. Kill Madam and you'll set Aldorn's economy on a downwards spiral it'll take decades to

recover from." Seeing his expression, she fell quiet, smiled her lovely smile at him. "You think I know too much for a slave?"

Bending to help her with their captive, the Klingon nodded briefly. "It has occurred to me you are well-versed in more than that which the Russian told us." He bound Madam's ankles to a length of rope tightly, then wrapped it around her neck and wrists. "Am I right, Katya?"

"And you - " she stated, satisfied with their joint work at last. She tipped her head on the side at him - "Are not what you seem either." Her blue gaze took in the Commander as well. "Neither of you."

Katya watched Worf haul the comatose body roughly to a spot where it would not easily be seen, and after he rechecked their handiwork, she covered it with sacking and old pieces of cloth which effectively deepened the shadows.

"What now?" Worf asked and rose dusting his knees down; he extended his hand and helped Katya to her feet.

She ignored his question, went over to Riker and examined his wounds, a rapid assessment of them. He grunted with pain as she probed mercilessly at his ribcage. "Broken," she announced, with the air of one who had found things pretty well the way she had expected.

Riker grimaced as another spasm shot through him while she frowned at the burn marks. "Back to... the... *Odysseus*?" he asked, and drew a breath carefully.

Katya gave an indication of agreement, and Worf lifted the Commander with thoughtful precision, heedful of his injuries.

They made slow but steady progress towards the spaceport, coming across no-one who would cause a problem. Worf could scarcely believe their good fortune. They had an injured compatriot, and no-one was taking advantage of their plight?! True, he was aware of covert interest, and some brazen speculation, but, for the most part that was all. Curiouser and curiouser.

The port had a number of people milling round and about it who could not be there on legitimate business, and the *Odysseus* had her own welcoming committee. It comprised several lethal-looking men and women who bristled with ill-concealed weapons. The big Klingon set his jaw, and half-carried his commanding officer to the gantry. He and Katya stepped up to the ringleader, and stared at him. The man wavered - it was clear he was uncertain - then abruptly made a wise choice, the only choice. He moved aside, and Worf went through with Katya to the rear and the contingent close on her heels.

Through the entrance at last, and the doors to the open bay slid shut with a welcoming soft shoosh. Worf did not take the time to relax, but headed for the small sickbay immediately. *Damn this!* he thought with irritation. *We're not going to be able to help the Commander much here. I must take the Odysseus back to the Enterprise.*

Something else occurred to him, and, as he set the Commander on one of the half dozen beds in sickbay, he listened hard for the sound of Katya's feet. She was close behind, he had no doubt, but he needed to find out, *had* to find out what her game was. Their mission could fail because of her presence, and he would not allow that to happen. Even though... The turmoil in his mind caused him to miss some information the tricorder was giving him about Riker's condition.

"Sir," he rumbled, "what have you found out about our guest?"

Riker's tired blue eyes focused on the Klingon for a second, and he turned his head to the side closing them again momentarily. He blinked at the clouding pain, the haze his wounds brought to him, and attempted to put his chaotic thoughts in order. He tried to recall exactly what Madam had been saying about Katya, when the door slid open and she stood there in person.

She joined Worf, and peered at the instrument in his hand. "He's got two broken ribs - lucky they didn't pierce a lung! - lacerations, a minor concussion and these goddamn burns!" She carefully, gently turned the Human's face, and her mouth twisted into a wry smile. "And they've broken your cheekbone, Grainger - " she paused, and chewed at her lip for a moment - "or should that be Commander Riker?"

Both men started at her words, and Riker tried to sit, only to find himself pushed firmly down to the mattress by the Klingon's hands.

"Do not move, sir," Worf said in commanding accents - he would put up with no argument - and, meekly, the First Officer obeyed.

Riker considered. Perhaps he could leave this to be handled by the Security Officer? He *was* a capable man when all was said and done. If the truth be known, he would gladly relinquish the matter to Worf without a struggle - not even a brief one. The Commander accepted the problem, then dismissed it. "Okay," he replied weakly, and watched the two protagonists with narrow eyes. This should be interesting!

Katya eyed both officers calmly. She was totally in control, and she waited

for them to speak, or, at least, one of them to. "Well?" she asked finally when neither seemed inclined to comment.

Worf grunted, and thinned his mouth. "We know you are not the property of Madam - " he gestured to indicate the exterior of the ship - "and you are... not what you seem... or *claim* to be. Why did they allow us to come back aboard - " he stepped closer to the woman, stared down into her eyes - "Katya, if you are not what you profess to be?"

Katya flung the coverall into a chair, followed it, crossing her slender limbs and resting a hand on her knee. She considered before replying. "They don't think for themselves, gentlemen," she said simply, and went on to explain further as it was plain neither officer was satisfied with this information. "They are dependent on orders from the top, namely Madam, and as we've taken care of her temporarily, they're at a loss. Her second will be trying to find her, and he's unlikely to for a couple of hours."

"That doesn't make sense," Worf stated gruffly. "Surely any second in command would be kept informed of - "

Katya held up a hand. "No," she replied. "You're thinking like a Federation officer, Worf, and not like the trader you're supposed to be."

The use of his name, her knowledge of it, made the Klingon step towards her; there was definite threat in him now. "Who are you?" he growled and lifted her out of the chair, careful to keep a good grip on her.

"Put me down," she ordered, and reluctantly, Worf obeyed but still kept her close at hand. She reached up, locked her hands around his neck. "Worf," she admonished gently, "think, dammit."

The Klingon put a tight rein on his temper, and did as he was bid. He thought. "You are either working for yourself, the Russian or - " his eyes widened as the idea percolated through his brain - "you... are... working for the... Federation?"

Katya's response was to press herself against him, pull his head down, and kiss him firmly, lingeringly on the mouth. "Very good, Lieutenant," she husked softly. "I'm on the same side as you."

Worf wet his mouth slightly with the tip of his tongue, and set Katya away from him. "We have no proof of that," he responded.

"No," she agreed. "You don't." Her eyes locked on his, her face intent with effort as she tried to put over her position. "I'll explain later, in as much detail as you want, but for now, Worf, let's get the hell out of here."

Riker coughed. "Where?"

"To the Enterprise," suggested Katya, further confounding the two men. She went on, "There we'll be better fitted to get those injuries treated. I'm no doctor."

Worf muttered something under his breath, and headed out of the sickbay to the bridge. Katya's brows twitched slightly in silent amusement, and she turned her regard on the First Officer. "You should be sedated, Commander." She sighed, and took a hypo from a cabinet. Turning back to him, she smiled. "Do you trust me, Riker?"

The First Officer gazed back at her with wary eyes. "I... don't... see that I... have much... choice, Katya." He coughed carefully again, setting his punished rib-cage to complaining once more.

"No, you don't," she agreed, repeating her earlier words. She set the instrument to the Commander's arm and its contents hissed into his bloodstream.

Riker fought the effects of the drug for as long as he could; he slipped inevitably towards oblivion, the sounds of the room echoing around him until darkness claimed him in its tender arms.

Katya checked he was safely asleep before she went from sickbay. She smiled to herself. The next few days should prove interesting.

The Enterprise loomed ahead of the Odysseus like a mother welcoming her lost child. She was all graceful lines against the soft velvet of the vacuum of space, and Worf had never felt so glad to be to back. The strain of the atmosphere aboard the little ship was becoming more than he could bear. Everywhere he went *she* was there in some form or another. She presented an enigma he felt unable to deal with, and he avoided contact as much as possible.

Katya remained Katya. She refused to speak of who she really was, or what. She regarded Worf with palpable amusement; her indigo eyes followed him all the time. She said to him on one occasion, "You'll have to deal with this soon," and left it at that. They got by. Just.

The Commander was no longer in pain, but he would require some surgery for the injuries he had sustained when Madam tortured him.

When Captain Picard's welcome baritone filled the bridge of the vessel at last, it was with relief the Klingon answered. "Sir, Commander Riker needs medical attention, and we have a... guest

to bring aboard."

The Captain's voice sounded vaguely curious. "Indeed?"

"Yes," responded Worf, and turned to glance at the woman who sat in the seat alongside him. She raised an arched brow, and smiled radiantly.

The ship juddered slightly as the Enterprise brought her tractor beam to bear on them.

"Ready to beam aboard, Mr. Worf?" asked the Captain. "Three?"

"Yes, sir," Worf replied, and waited. The familiar tingle of the transporter effect overtook his senses, and they eventually solidified in one of the transporter rooms aboard the Enterprise.

Riker was transferred directly to sickbay; Worf and Katya were greeted by Picard himself along with Counselor Troi and Data.

"It's good to have you back, Worf," said the Captain, but spared a small part of his attention for the lovely creature who had beamed aboard with the Klingon. He gave Katya a polite nod. "Who is this, Lieutenant?"

Worf took a deep breath. "I... do not know, Captain."

Picard's brows rose slightly in response to this answer, and he examined the woman more closely. "Madam?" he asked.

In reply, Katya stepped down from the platform and held out her hand to the Captain. "Please, Captain Picard, if you will contact Starfleet headquarters and request the records of Commander Miriam Ortiz, then take a retina scan I feel certain they will match. Until this

can be arranged - " she hesitated, then slipped her hand into the crook of Worf's elbow - "I'll remain under Worf's supervision."

The Captain dropped the hand he held. "Commander?" He gave her a slight bow, then said, "A meeting in the observation lounge as soon as I've seen Commander Riker, Mr. Worf. If you'll bring the Commander we can get Beverly to arrange that scan."

"Aye, sir," said the Klingon, and turned his attention to Katya... to Miriam Ortiz. Commander Miriam Ortiz. They all left together, and got into the nearest turbolift.

Crusher was standing next to a diagnostic table on which lay the prone figure of the First Officer. His vital signs were stable, there were no indications of bodily trauma, the wounds he had received showed every indication of healing properly. He even managed a wry smile as his shipmates and Captain approached.

The Doctor tutted slightly, and pursed her lips. "Better than you've any damn right to be, Will," she said testily, and flicked auburn hair out of her face. She eyed the arrivals over her shoulder, and put her hands in her jacket pockets. "He's healing nicely, Jean-Luc. Should have him back on duty in twelve hours or so - " she grinned at the Commander suddenly - "and, I'll guess you'd like to be yourself again, huh?"

Riker's face underwent a dramatic change. "Oh, Bev, I dunno. I've got kinda used to this face."

The Counselor's lovely eyes widened very slightly at his words, and she made a little face; she snorted with disgust. "I thought you were hurt, Will?" she said, and spun on her heel to head out

of sickbay.

"Deanna, I *am*," he protested. "Was," he amended, and gave a tiny shrug. Just being back aboard the Enterprise was a therapy in itself, and his ready sense of humour easily reasserted itself in familiar surroundings.

"Hah!" They all heard Troi's scathing reply to his protestations.

Picard called, "Conference in twenty minutes, Counselor." A faint 'Aye, sir,' followed this. The Captain went on, "Allow me to introduce Commander Miriam Ortiz, Doctor." Riker's eyebrows shot into his hairline. "I want you to take a retina scan so we can confirm her identity."

Crusher examined the newcomer critically, her blue orbs appraising what she saw with practised ease. "Sure, Captain. Commander, if you'd come with me."

Katya/Ortiz smiled at her companions, and left with the Doctor. Both women headed for a small side ward.

"Worf?" asked Riker and Picard together.

Data watched the interplay between his crewmates with keen interest.

The Klingon clenched his jaw, and glowered. Then he shrugged. "I don't understand her," was all he felt he could say at this particular juncture.

Riker made a very peculiar sound, a sort of strangled noise, then turned it into throat clearing. Worf glared at the Commander, much to Picard's well hidden amusement.

A few moments later, Crusher

reappeared with her companion, and spoke up as she handed Data some software, "This is the scan. Transmit to Starfleet and they should find it's enough to identify Miriam to everybody's satisfaction." She flashed the Commander a quick smile, then withdrew to get on with her work.

Picard addressed the Klingon. "Take Commander Ortiz to guest quarters, Worf." He looked at the woman who was singlehandedly causing a lot of jumping about within his staff. "If you'll go with Lt. Worf for the time being, we'll call you as soon as we have confirmation from Starfleet headquarters."

Ortiz graciously inclined her lovely head and went off happily in the Klingon's wake.

"So, Number One?" Picard's few words said it all, and his First took in a deep breath, then huffed it out sharply.

"I see," responded the Captain.

Worf delivered the Commander and loitered on the threshold for a moment. At last, he said, "Katya... Commander - " he corrected himself self-consciously - "I..." he trailed off, uncertain, then, more strongly. "I want to talk to you."

"Miriam," she said, and waved a hand at a chair. She seated herself, leaned back comfortably in the chair.

"Miriam..." Worf moved further into the room. He hesitated. "What reason can you give me for the - " he folded his arms and turned his back to her - "the acting." He waited for her to respond, and when he heard nothing, half-turned back to her.

The silence was deafening. Then,

she rose and came to stand in front of him. "Worf," she said softly, and put her hand on his tense arm. The beautiful face tilted up to him, and she sighed. "At first, you're right, it was play-acting. To throw you off the scent," she explained; her hand tightened, and she frowned slightly. "Then... I found out it wasn't acting any more." She gave a rueful laugh, and her long silken lashes brushed her cheeks as they shuttered her eyes for a moment. Her pupils expanded to round black holes, nearly obscuring the stormy depths surrounding them. The hand moved up on to his chest, rested there, then hovered as she thought to touch his face. She became intense. "You see, I didn't know who you were at first, and I couldn't afford to let up on a role I've been playing for quite a long time."

"What was the truth, and what was not?" Worf wanted to know, not mollified in the slightest.

"Does it matter?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Ahh, the truth! Where do I start, I wonder?" Ortiz pondered aloud. "No simple task this, Worf." She moved away, and said, "Sit down if you've a mind to, and listen. The telling will take some time."

Worf sat, and watched her pace the length of the room restlessly, setting the skirt of her dress billowing outwards to leave a faint trail of perfume as she moved.

As suddenly as she had begun, she stopped and faced him. "I was born on Aldorn III, and I grew up there. My parents managed to get away when I was fifteen years old, and I went on to University and studied Sociology. I became quite an authority on the structural changes a society can undergo

when subjected to criminal elements for a certain length of time." She gave a hollow bark of laughter. "I even got it down to an equation. Neatly categorised, Worf. People's lives all put into neat little boxes. I even found a niche of my own. I got married, had a child, and then on a return visit to my home-world, my family was killed by Madam's henchmen. I escaped, but had to have extensive plastic surgery to survive. I woke up with this face, and enough rage to want to do something. Really *do* something. Something that would count." She rubbed her face wearily, and gazed over at the Klingon. "I'm a civilian adviser, strictly speaking, but when this chance came up, I jumped at it. The rank is temporary, and I should go back to being plain Miriam Ortiz... sooner rather than later, I think." Finished, she turned her attention to the large window, and gazed out into the endless night. A solitary tear made its way down her cheek, and the corner of her mouth quivered slightly. "You were accidentally involved." She turned her face back to look at him. "I... really *do* care about you. That in itself is a mistake." Her voice was bitter, bleak even.

Worf had listened to the tale she had to tell, examined it critically, and found - much to his astonishment - that he believed her. "You killed in cold blood," he reminded her; this had both shocked and surprised him.

Miriam Ortiz nodded. "Yes, I did, didn't I. It seemed expedient at the time, if over-zealous." She tightened her mouth. "But I do not see why I should have to explain my actions particularly."

"Perhaps not," Worf agreed, and went to her, put his hands on her waist; she rested her forehead on his upper arm lightly. "Miriam," he spoke her name slowly, and she raised dark, tempestuous eyes to his face. "You are like no other

Human woman I've ever met..." His voice trailed to a halt, and he decided further talk could wait.

Carefully, like a man with porcelain in his hands, Worf bent his head to her mouth and tasted the soft sweetness of her. Soft, yes, but ardent; her reaction left him in no doubt of her feelings, and he deepened the kiss to bite at her lips and her throat. He traced a finger along the edge of the neckline of the dress, then brought his hand down to cup a breast. The start of their lovemaking was interrupted by the twitter of the door.

Guiltily, they sprang apart, and Miriam Ortiz covered her flushed cheeks with her hands. They trembled. "Come," she said hoarsely.

In the entrance was Data. Worf relaxed - Data would be certain to miss the more subtle nuances his Human colleagues would have picked up immediately - and he asked the android, "Debriefing?"

"No," Data replied. "Commander Ortiz, would you accompany us to the observation lounge, please."

She gave the android a half-smile. "Of course."

Picard tugged his uniform into place and smiled at Troi as she joined him in the observation lounge. "Counselor," he acknowledged her presence, and waved her to a seat.

The Betazoid responded in kind. "Sir."

Picard grimaced slightly before addressing the problem uppermost in his mind, then he looked over at Troi. "Your assessment of the woman who purports

to be Commander Miriam Ortiz, please, Deanna."

Troi considered carefully before she replied. "I can't detect any duplicity in her, sir." She glanced up at the Captain before continuing, "But all it could mean she is good at divorcing herself from her feelings."

"Good at disguising them?" Picard asked.

The Betazoid frowned slightly, drawing her brows together over her nose. "Your conjecture is valid, Captain, but unlikely. I would sense immediately any attempt by her to project a lie. No, she is... calm - " Troi hesitated, and shrugged - "she's in control, and believes utterly what she's saying."

The Captain pushed. "No trace of inherent mental instability?"

Troi shook her head. "As sane as you or I, Captain," she replied firmly.

"Hmmm." Picard accepted his ship's psychologist's testament reluctantly. Starfleet had been very prompt in responding to the request Data had sent, and even as he stood waiting for his officers to turn up, he glanced at the information the datapad contained. It seemed their guest existed. He sat at the head of the table as the doors slid open, and Worf, Data and Miriam Ortiz entered.

The pad hit the smooth surface of the table with a firm click, and Picard tipped his head to better observe the woman who placed herself opposite Troi. "It seems," he said slowly, not without trepidation, "that Starfleet not only positively identify you, Commander, but they also wish us to assist you in getting back under cover. We've inadvertently blown your disguise, it seems."

Ortiz gave a brief inclination of her head towards the Captain, but she did not seem overjoyed by the information. Quietly, she said, "I'll be grateful for whatever help you can supply, Captain."

Picard chewed a thumb for a second, then leaned forward his expression severe. "How can you help us, Commander, to retrieve the Bretarrth?"

Ortiz gave him a tight-lipped smile, and flicked her stormy gaze around the room at each of its occupants. "I think I know how to find where Vasili Ivanovich has his... 'stock'."

Worf leaned forward and glowered at her from beneath heavy brows. "How?" he growled.

She tapped her fingers on the table top, ran a hand through tight curls of hair, and scratched her neck. "I believe they're still on Aldorn, gentlemen - " she smiled at Troi apologetically - "on the fourth continent."

"Why did you not inform me of this?" Worf barked, furious.

Calmly Miriam swung her chair to face the irate Klingon. "I could've," she agreed, and then spread her hands wide. "And I could also have left Commander Riker to bear the brunt of Madam's displeasure." She narrowed her eyes and spoke tightly. "Or would you rather I'd left him to die? That was an option, you know."

Worf sat back heavily in the seat. "Nooo... " he responded gruffly. "Why didn't you tell me after we returned to the Odysseus?"

Miriam sighed. "There was no time, and it did not seem as urgent as getting Riker to proper medical treatment." She

set her hand on his. "Worf, this was important to you - " she gave a snort - "and I needed to lie low for a while. It served a purpose."

The Klingon's face became unreadable. There were things she was not saying. He said coldly, "Where on the fourth continent?"

Data piped up at last, "Computer, display topographical map of Aldorn III's fourth continent." The computer obeyed, and as the 3-D display unfurled in front of them the massive mountain range which characterised the continent struck them all forcibly.

Without a pause, the Second Officer continued. "Commander Ortiz, if you would indicate - "

Ortiz raised a brow at the display, pursed her mouth and described a tortuous path through the mountains. Eventually, she tapped the forefinger she was using on the holograph at one particular spot. "There," she announced.

"Increase grid reference D36.172 by 150%," ordered Data. The computer obliged and the small section Miriam had tapped swung into clear view. They were looking at a valley. One which was hard to get at - very hard. "Fascinating," said the android.

Picard got up and came closer to the display. "Indeed," he echoed. "Mr. Data, how long have we got before the Bretarrth's Child undergoes metamorphosis?"

Data's faintly golden face acquired an inward expression as he consulted his information banks. Snapping back to attention after he had been gone for a second, his golden eyes cleared and he replied, "We have approximately four point oh oh three days, Captain."

"Approximately," responded the Captain with faint amusement.

"Yes, sir," said Data, slightly bemused.

The Captain returned his attention to Commander Ortiz. "How well do you know the terrain?"

Miriam peered at the valley with interest, subjecting the surrounding area to a piercing examination. She shook her head. "I don't, Captain." She jabbed a finger at the display as it continued to glow whitely against the black of the table. "This area is not visited on any regular basis that I could ascertain. I stumbled on the information by accident - " she stared deep into Picard's hazel eyes - "it was of no importance to me. My brief was to undermine Madam's operation as best I could, and get the information out."

Worf gave a growl; he suddenly understood something. His Captain directed a sharp glance at the Security Chief. "Let's hear what you have to say, Mr. Worf."

The Klingon knitted his fingers together. "Commander Ortiz came across the information, and the Russian realised she had somehow obtained it. He captured you; you told him you worked for Madam - " Miriam smiled encouragingly, and gave a brief nod - "he believed you. He didn't kill you because you were worth more alive as an informant, and... as a possible sale."

"Nearly right," she approved. "He was careless. He would've done better to kill me and be done, but the man is greedy." She wagged a finger at them all. "That could prove very useful leverage in getting the Bretarrth's Child back."

"Greedy," stated Picard coldly, "is always good leverage."

Worf examined the valley and surroundings closely, and narrowed his eyes. "A shuttlecraft could get in there, sir," he said. He, too, traced the outline of the route Miriam had inscribed. "There would be the most likely place for the Bretarrth to be held, Captain."

Data nodded agreement and spoke up again. "The indications are, Captain, that this particular area has the necessary requirements for the Child to fulfil its metamorphosis to the transitory stage before true adulthood. However, the asexual budding would be completed by thirty hours."

"That doesn't leave us much time, Data," replied the Captain unhappily.

"No, sir," agreed the android calmly.

Picard set the palms of his hands flat on the table top, and took a sharp breath, then let it out slowly. Tapping his combadge, he said, "Ensign Storr, change our heading to mark 771.23, Warp Seven."

There was momentary silence, then a disembodied female voice responded with a brisk, "Aye, sir."

The Captain returned his attention to the people around the table, and went on, "Deanna, you must go with the away team to ensure the Child is not traumatised in any way. Mr. Worf, I want you to head the team until Commander Riker is back on duty, and select - "

Miriam interrupted him quickly. "I request permission to go along as well, Captain."

"No," said Picard. "You've already stated you don't know the area. You, and we, would be better served if you were to stay on the Enterprise and find a way back to Aldorn which would not alert the

- " he cleared his throat - "er... the planetary 'leaders' who seem to be after your blood."

Ortiz gave him a narrow calculating look out of cold eyes before saying, "And of course, a bloody great starship is something that's so easy to miss... sir," she added as an afterthought.

Worf said, "Permission to arrange the away team details, Captain."

"Make it so," said Picard, dismissing the Klingon but keeping Ortiz pinned to her seat with a gimlet stare. Neither of them noticed Worf leave with Data, and Troi watched the developing situation with interest.

The Captain stood up and walked round the table to stand close to Commander Ortiz. "Commander," he began, "your role in this particular farce is now ended. Transmit the information you've obtained to Starfleet using our security channels, and take the time to think about how you are going to get back to the job you were doing."

Miriam's face became mutinous; she set her jaw, and the Captain, recognising signs of rebellion, snapped, "That's an order, Commander. You may have temporary rank only, but that still places you under my command for now." He stared down at her. "And I expect my orders to be obeyed. Do I make myself clear?"

Ortiz stood as well, and snapped a salute which had heavy tones of sarcasm. "Crystal clear," she responded. "Do I have permission, Captain, to return to quarters, or would you rather Worf put me in the brig for safe keeping?"

Picard folded his arms. "I would, naturally, prefer not to take that measure, but it is an alternative."

Miriam laughed suddenly, and gave the Captain a genuinely warm smile - it quite took his breath away - saying, "As you wish, sir." As she headed out of the observation lounge, she paused, half-turned back to them. "If I *can* offer any further insight..." She allowed the sentence to trail to a halt.

"Liaise with Worf," said Picard, and received another smile for his pains. He turned back to Troi, cocked an eyebrow at her in question.

The Counselor shrugged and followed her Captain out of the room back to the bridge.

Miriam decided, after her run-in with the Captain, she would visit Commander Riker to make certain he was on the mend, and that he would be on duty soon. She felt guilty - an emotion which she had had to discard along with a great deal of other emotional baggage to survive the dog eat dog situation on Aldorn. Learning to kill without feeling had nearly proved to be her undoing - nearly. It had taken her own near death to prove the people running Aldorn and planets like it were dross. Since that day, she had not looked back. If her survival necessitated the death of another, then so be it. She could not afford moralistic arguments to cloud her judgement.

She tapped her small computer console off, and stared moodily instead into the darkened screen without making the effort to go to sickbay. She noticed her reflection, and pulled a face at it. "Done it now, girl," she said scathingly to her mirror image. She did not expect a reply, so was not surprised when one did not appear to be forthcoming.

Swivelling the chair round, she headed for the sonic shower and

appraised the clothing she had laid out on the bed.

A shower, a drink, a visit to sickbay, and back to quarters. She would be bored.

After the shower, refreshed, Miriam wrapped a robe around herself, and settled down to watch the starfield speed past the large window set in the bulkhead of the cabin. The drink warmed her hands, and she became lost in thought.

When the door sounded, she answered absently. "Come." She did not turn to see who it was.

Eventually, she broke her attention from the window and focused instead on the reflection of the Security Chief as he stood watching her. She turned her head, and patted the seat next to her.

Worf made his way over to the settee, and perched himself beside her.

"Why are you here?" Miriam asked suddenly, wondering if there was something wrong. She noticed he appeared different, and realised the clothing had gone, as had the scars, to be replaced by a Starfleet uniform. With one difference, a silver sash over one shoulder. She fingered it for a second curiously, then regarded her toes which were tucked up under her backside. "No problems, I hope?"

"None," rumbled Worf. He fell silent again, regarded her profile. "We have unfinished business, you and I," he concluded.

The dark blue eyes swivelled in his direction, and a smile crept onto her mouth. Leaning against him comfortably, Miriam breathed out a little sigh. "You took your damn time."

Worf reached out a hand, ran his knuckles across her cheek and was gratified to see her close her eyes and shift in to him. He continued to stroke her, moving his hand down the curve of her neck then into the dark shadow where the robe she wore gaped open, her soft flesh tantalising, warm, rounded.

Miriam turned into the circle of his arms, and wrapped her own around his neck. "Worf," she whispered, and groaned as he caressed her.

Her breath was hot against his neck, and Worf growled, pushed the robe down over her shoulders and bit them, moving his mouth across the sensitive skin along her collarbone, stirring the fires of desire in her, and in him.

"Come," she murmured, and pulled away from him with smouldering eyes which held such promise. She kept her face turned towards him over one shoulder as she went through to the bedroom.

As Miriam disappeared, Worf paused for a second then went after her, discarding the sash and his jacket as he went. Leaning in the doorway, he watched her undo the belt of the robe, watched her drop it to the floor, saw her bring her arms above her head in a stretch and enjoyed the sight of her loveliness. As she lifted the curls scattered along her slender neck with her hands, he considered her beautiful, and she knew it. Her movements were a slow hypnotic dance which beckoned, enticed him to join her, and he went to her, reaching for her.

As his hands touched the slender span of her waist, Miriam purred, "Come to bed, Worf."

She turned in his grasp, and together they moved to the bed, together

they began the task of releasing their mutual desire. He was astounded by the realisation he had found a passion to match his own, more so because she was Human. And then thought fled to be replaced by sensation.

Captain's Log, Stardate 47865.5. We are in standard orbit above Aldorn III, and Lt. Worf and Commander Riker are preparing to take a shuttlecraft to the fourth continent to release the Child.

It is perilously near metamorphosis, though we have made exceptionally good time, and we cannot... must not be too late to ensure its return to its parents. A whole race would be doomed to extinction.

The away team is to include Data and Counselor Troi, as well as Worf and Commander Riker.

Our other problem, Commander Ortiz, seems resigned to staying behind on the Enterprise. She has been of some assistance in providing some idea of where the Russian and the Tellarite would keep the Child. She concurred with Data's suggestion, and together they have been able to formulate a reasonable map of the area.

All we need is for time to run out on us...

Picard concluded his log entry, settled back in his chair and picked up the report on his desk. He was not surprised to see the planetary authorities were protesting in an extremely voluble

manner about the Starship in their immediate space. There had been vague mutterings as well about 'Starfleet poking its nose into other people's affairs for far too long, and don't think Aldorn wouldn't take this to a higher authority.'

The Captain remained polite, distant and totally unimpressed by the bluster, the shows of righteous anger, or the attempts at outright blackmail.

Oh, but these people were subtle. Low down vulpine cunning was what came across, and their leaders - if the positions were capable of being dignified with that term - were changed more often than underwear. Not a moment passed when some new name presented itself for his attention. Briefly, Picard wondered if he would ever see the true power behind the puppets. He doubted it. String-pulling was in a league of its own here.

Amid his pondering, the Captain was relieved to hear the beep of his communicator. "Picard here," he responded.

"Captain," said Riker's voice, "the away team is assembled."

"Excellent, Number One." Picard fell silent for a moment, then added as an afterthought, "Good luck."

"Thanks," the voice of Will Riker said. There was a faint smile in the tenor of that voice. "Riker out."

Picard rose, went out of the ready room, and strolled to stand between ops and con. The viewscreen showed the face of Aldorn III revolving slowly on its axis, all blue and white and golden green, a fair world. Then he saw what he was looking for; the small shuttlecraft that sped away from the Enterprise. He headed back to the command chair to wait.

He was good at waiting.

The shuttlecraft settled easily on the rocky plateau which had been picked for landing, and when the nacelles had whined to a stop, the door opened in its side spilling out the away team.

Data set his feet at the overhang and stared down into the valley which fell away from him like a green slash across the face of the mountain range. Along the walls of the valley were trees, which thinned as they reached where the soil was too meagre to sustain a complex root system. Other smaller plants clung tenaciously to the sides of the rock, their small bright stars of flowers peppering the granite with vivid colour.

The android consulted his tricorder, and set off away from the shuttlecraft at an angle of some 30%. This course should lead to the easier way down into the valley. He was not certain if 'easier' was a term he could apply in these circumstances.

He was gratified when he and Commander Ortiz were proved correct. There was a pathway - of a sort. It was narrow, treacherous and steep. At a push, though, they should all be able to manage it.

"Over here," he called, and was joined by his companions.

Riker peered carefully down the slope, and nodded briefly. Not too difficult, he reckoned, and gesturing silently they all began the slow walk downwards.

In half an hour they had cleared the most difficult stretch of the walk and were now heading into wooded country. It was nothing but scrubby brush at first,

but gradually thickened into true trees as they moved onwards. Finally, after crossing a small river via some stepping stones, they arrived at the place indicated by Miriam as being the possible place for the Child to be.

"Deanna," Riker asked, scanning the area with keen eyes, "do you sense the Bretarrth anywhere?"

Troi concentrated. She pushed aside the clamour of her companion's emotions and felt delicately for the peculiar mind-signature of the Child. A mind which should respond to her touch as it had been so long from its parents. There was nothing, and she opened her eyes to gaze with open distress at the Commander and the other two men.

"I can't feel it, Will," she said, worry permeated her voice. This was bad. This was a terrible upturn in events. If the Child was too traumatised to react to her empathy... She did not even want to finish the thought.

Riker sighed, and signalled to Worf and Data who came back to where they stood. "Try again, Deanna," he urged, and turned his attention on the other officers. "Anything?"

Worf pointed into a clearing. "Through there, Commander, is a life-reading." He went on. "There are others."

"Agreed," said Data. He consulted the tricorder once more, and headed off into the clearing closely followed by the Klingon.

Riker remained with Troi as she attempted to establish contact. "Deanna?" he asked again, holding her shoulders. The Betazoid swayed with her effort.

Dark eyes opened, and a faint glimmer of hope shone in their depths.

"It shut itself away, Will. It knows we're here to help it now."

"How soon to metamorphosis, Counselor?" Riker insisted, and Troi concentrated again to try and find the answer.

She shook her head, setting the long ebony strands of her hair in motion across her back. "It doesn't know, Will. It's been so... long - " her voice was filled with poignancy, and deep sorrow - "since the parents touched it. It thought it would go mad without them. It weeps." She shuddered briefly, and looked inward for long moments. "Poor little one," she murmured.

The Klingon's shout came echoing through the trees to them, and they both set off at a run to where the sound came from.

The Child lay in a shallow hollow covered with detritus of various sorts. Pieces of leaf mould, humus, soil, small pebbles clung to the faintly glowing skin of the Child, and Troi moved to its side, pushing past the Commander and the Klingon impatiently.

Reaching out her hands, she placed them gently, hesitantly, on the surface skin of the Bretarrth. Equally gently, the skin reached around her hand, enveloping it slightly around the fingers. Troi closed her eyes, and concentrated, allowed her mind to brush against the fledgeling's id, touching and reassuring.

The response she received was almost instantaneous. The Child took shape in her imagination, solidified into the near-clarity of adulthood. Alien emotions washed over her as resolutely as the ebb and flow of the tide.

Opening her eyes, she/it was startled by unfamiliar/known figures

radiating varying degrees of concern, though one's mind was devoid of any thought she/it could grasp.

Troi withdrew her hands almost reluctantly, and smiled. Shaking her head to clear her mind of the perceptions of the Child, to replace them with her own, she managed to say, as she looked up at Riker and Worf, "It's pleased to see us."

Worf grunted, and went ahead of the rest of the team, sweeping the area with his tricorder and checking the readings.

Riker put a hand on Deanna's shoulder, and asked, "What about getting it out of here?"

"Will, you know the transporter isn't a viable alternative with its being this close to metamorphosis." She spoke apologetically, but they both knew this was a real problem.

Riker was saved from further comment by Data calling. "Sir!"

The Klingon Security Chief and the Second Officer were standing fairly close to the entrance of a largish cave. Worf's face was shuttered, but his eyes burned with a flame Riker recognised only too well. The smell hit him as he came closer to them.

"Christ!" he exclaimed, and peered at the tricorder held loosely in Worf's fingers. He raised eyes gone hard with rage, and shoved at the cover on the opening with a shoulder. Worf and Data joined in, soon having the entrance cleared.

The light spilled on a pathetic sight. There were women and children held in the cave; all whimpered as the officers made their way through them. The remnants of food long gone rotten

scattered the packed soil of the cave, and the midden stench of the place assailed their nostrils with pungent, acrid fumes setting their eyes to watering.

Worf clenched his jaw, and set about searching the area more thoroughly. He had been right about Vasili Ivanovich; he required killing! There was no honour in what this man did to his captives.

Data, less affected than his shipmates, expertly ran the tricorder over the pitiful scraps in the cave, and rejoined his friends. "There are some individuals in need of immediate medical attention, Commander," he stated calmly.

Riker gave a brusque nod of his head, and struck his insignia quite forcibly. "Riker to sickbay."

"Commander?" enquired Beverly Crusher's voice.

"We're going to need you and a medical team down here pretty sharpish, Bev," Riker said. "There're some people in quite bad shape."

The Doctor's voice was sharp as she asked, "Can you be more specific, Will?"

Data piped up. "Lacerations mostly, Doctor. Nothing life threatening, but there are indications of gross ill-treatment. Some of the captives appear to have been subjected to crude methods of torture." He paused as he considered his next words. "I believe the mental state of these people to be questionable."

Worf strode up to Riker again trying to attract his attention, but the First Officer waved him down for a second as he spoke to the Doctor. "Bring an anti-grav trolley, Bev. We've gotta try and move the Child, and it masses a good thousand kilos."

"That big?" questioned Crusher, and went on hurriedly. "That's very nearly the weight it has to be before -"

"Yeah," agreed Riker. "No time to waste, Doctor. Riker out." He turned his attention to Worf who had stood with remarkable forbearance whilst he concluded his conversation with Crusher. "Yes?"

"Sir, I believe the Russian is close at hand."

Riker's face set into a grim mask. "Oh?"

The Klingon jerked his thumb in a westerly direction away from the cave, and Riker tilted his head in an interested fashion. "Let's go find out, Worf."

"I would like to have a couple of my men with us, Commander," Worf said, and at the Commander's nod of agreement, tapped his combadge. "Ensigns Roget and Perry, report to these co-ordinates immediately. Ensure you are adequately armed."

The shapes of the two Security men shimmered into existence a few moments later, along with the medical team put together by Crusher. They also brought the requested trolley with them.

Joining their commanding officer and the First Officer, the four men set off at a steady pace in the direction Worf had indicated. They covered the ground fairly quickly, and just before they got to their destination, a bright beam of light shot out from an innocuous looking clump of trees to burn a distinctive looking hole in the ground.

"Wants to play rough," commented Riker from the position he had ducked down to. He poked his head out of the cover after adjusting his phaser, and

watched the Klingon wave his personnel into position. He crawled cautiously to Worf's side. "Is there a ship in there?"

Worf shook his head, and Data who had been behind them, caught up and flung himself out of the reach of another beam. "Sir, the shots would seem to be being fired from that direction - " he pointed at the thicket of trees - "and some 43° east from the position of those rocks."

The Klingon grunted, and crawled, commando style, closer to the trees, keeping his head down. "I'll go that way," he growled into his insignia, and made his way slowly over to some rocks which would provide some better cover.

Riker could hear him co-ordinating his men's movements, and followed his instructions when they came.

The Russian and his compatriot really did not stand a chance of getting away, and it was all over very quickly. A quick rush, some brief infighting, and the two traders were caught, disarmed and brought to Worf.

Perry prodded the Russian forward with the phaser planted neatly in the small of his back. Roget had Gork.

Worf frisked both prisoners roughly, and walked around them.

Vasili Ivanovich grinned, and shrugged. "Starfleet are welcome to look around my pitch..." He trailed off when the Klingon directed a venomous stare at him; he raised his hands in a supplicating gesture totally wasted on Worf, who was unimpressed by anything the Russian could do.

Worf came very close to the Russian, and stared down into the small piggy eyes set in folds of dirty skin. "You," he began with relish, "will stand

trial for the kidnapping of the Bretarrth Child, and for the attempted murder of Starfleet personnel in the pursuit of their duty." He fastened a large fist in the man's clothing and dragged him closer. "You will also answer for the trading of slaves, and illegal possession of Federation citizens."

The Russian appeared unfazed by the accusations, and shrugged himself free, almost contemptuously, of the Klingon's grasp. "Prove it," he said, and smiled slowly.

Worf shared a disbelieving glance with the Commander, and returned his attention to the smaller man. "Prove it?" he repeated in fairly stunned tones. "There's no need. The proof is here."

Vasili Ivanovich bared his discoloured teeth in what could, very loosely, be described as a smile. "Me 'n' Gork don't have any papers here. We're clean, Klingon. All you know is that we came to help free these people." He smiled again, and waited.

Data had overheard the conversation, and after completing a thorough search of the area rejoined his friends. He managed to look apologetic. "Technically, Lieutenant, Vasili Ivanovich is correct. There is no proof here to - "

Riker cut in furiously. "What about the prisoners?"

Data tipped his head slightly. "Careful questioning does not reveal they were aware of their captors' identity - " the Russian's smile grew wider - "nor do they have any recollection of seeing their captors at feeding time."

"If we cannot try them on slaving," Worf said coldly, "then attempted murder should do."

"Self-defence," the Russian protested, and went on in oily accents. "We didn't realise you were Starfleet, and thought you might be dangerous criminals about to hurt the prisoners."

Worf made a noise which sounded like he was gagging, and turned his back on them folding his arms across his chest. Something occurred to him; then, certain they could have this piece of @*&& on the run, he smiled. He said, "Commander, I believe we have a witness to this man's criminal exercises aboard the Enterprise, even if he can wriggle out of these charges like a Ferengi."

Vasili Ivanovich pricked up his ears, and waited to hear more, but Worf was far too canny to give away too much.

Riker grinned approval, and arranged for the two slavers to be transported back to the Enterprise. Then he and the rest of the away team turned their attention back to the Child, the real reason for their time and trouble.

Some time later, back aboard the Enterprise, Worf went in search of Miriam Ortiz. The computer directed him to Holodeck Two, and he entered the room as the doors slid open.

She was sitting watching a woman, a small boy and a man chasing a ball with a dog of the small multi-bred variety.

Hairy and slobbery, the dog leaped about with abandoned delight as the ball was thrown for it. Boy and dog ran after the ball, and the woman and man put their arms around each other and followed, laughing.

Miriam looked up at the sound of his approach, and gave him a faint acknowledgement. Her features

rearranged themselves into a serious expression, and she settled back to watch the players in silence again.

Standing beside her, Worf watched the antics for a moment, then asked, "This is you and your husband and son?"

Her lovely mouth twisted into a wary smile, and she just nodded slightly in reply.

He took her arms in his hands, lifting her, and turned her to face him, away from the simulation of life. "You know we've captured the Russian?"

"Yes. I know," she responded and waited for him to continue, but went on herself when she realised he was not going to say anymore. "You want me to identify him, and testify in the trial?"

Worf nodded, and gazed into the indigo depths of her eyes. "Why are you here, Miriam?"

"Here?" She gestured at the Holodeck and received an affirmative answer to her question. She sighed. "Computer, freeze programme." Obediently the images of her past froze in motion, and she took herself away from Worf to look closely at her doppelganger. She answered his last question with a derisive little shrug. "I don't know why I'm here. I'm no longer this woman." She snorted. "P'raps I never was..." Her voice trailed off, and she gazed down at her feet.

"Will you testify?" Worf wanted to know, then waited for her to reply. She did not answer, so he joined her and tilted her face up. "Will you?" he repeated.

Miriam brushed his hand away from her face, and said, "Look at me, Worf, at the way I was. Was I happy, do you think? Did I love this man?" She

turned away, hugged her arms about her body briefly. "I used to think my life was tied into the well-being of those two people, and for a long time after their deaths I was willing to throw away my own."

Worf listened, but shook his head in impatience. "You live for yesterday," he stated angrily, "when living for the now is more important. I do not understand."

She laughed, a weary sound. "Computer, five throwing knives." Dutifully, the computer materialised her request, and she picked them up and handed them to Worf. She moved some distance from him, and said, "Throw one at me."

The Klingon scowled. "Is there a point to this?"

"Just throw it!" she snapped.

Worf obliged, and threw a knife at her which she snatched out of the air. He hefted the remaining four, and cocked his head at her in a bemused fashion.

"All of them, Worf. One at a time," Miriam said.

He accommodated her request and watched, impressed, as she caught them deftly and set them all in motion around her. The only sound on the Holodeck for the moment was the sound of the knife handles smacking into her palms.

"A neat trick," he agreed, and asked again. "Is there a point to your demonstration?"

Miriam stepped aside, and allowed the knives to fall, unhindered, to the ground. "They're like the strands of my life, Worf. One slip and I could be dead, or injured. I needed to juggle to keep

myself alive. Perhaps now... perhaps now - " her nostrils flared as the words tumbled from her lips - "it's time to move on."

"Then you *will* give evidence at a trial," he stated firmly, and walked to where she was standing.

Miriam allowed him to take her in his arms. "Yes," she said, "I will." She rested against him, feeling safe for the first time in a long, long while. She raised her head, shared a look with Worf, and smiled, genuinely, with real warmth. "And maybe - just maybe - I'll start living instead of juggling."

Worf grunted, and held her close, setting his mouth in the glory of her hair.

Captain's Log, Stardate 47886.3.
The Child has been safely returned to its parents, and the line which it will set up will now continue uninterrupted. The Bretarrth have indicated their further gratitude by allowing the Federation to continue with the study of the native species which are responsible for the deposits of Rilidium.

Commander Ortiz has left the Enterprise and is a witness for the prosecution against the Russian and Gork. She has also indicated a wish to return to her former life as a Sociologist. She told me a chapter of her life had just finished, and she was about to start writing another.

I hope she finds success.



